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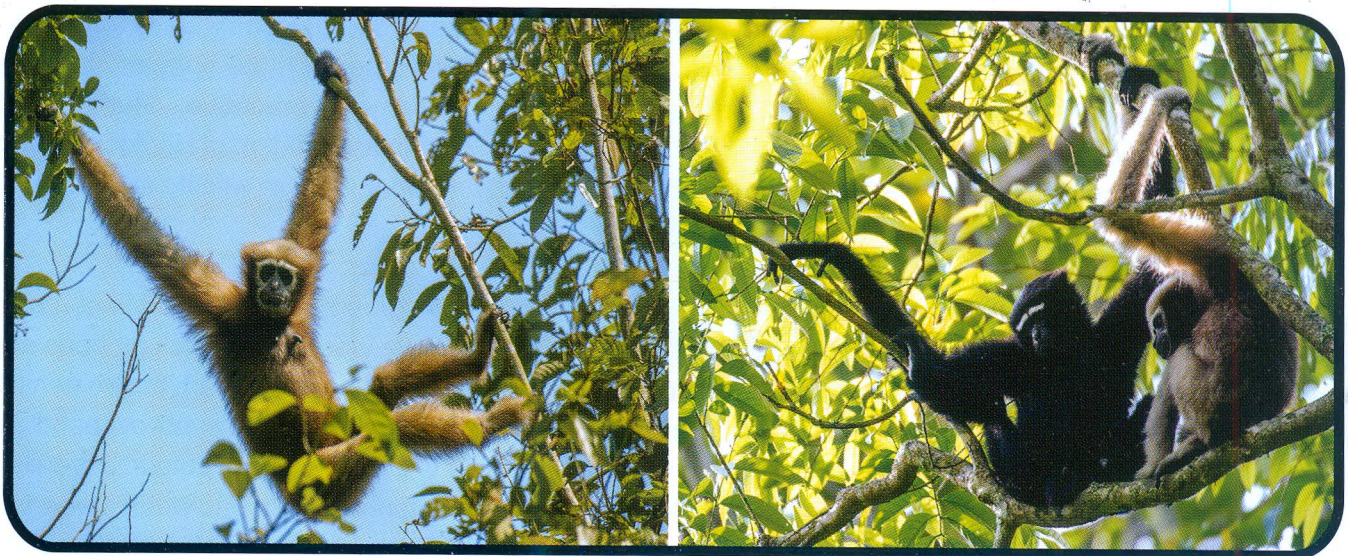
## GIBBON CONSERVATION IN INDIA

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As a mega-biodiversity country, India supports a rich floral and faunal diversity. The order primate constitutes only a small fraction of the country's rich mammalian fauna. The total strength of the order primate in terms of number of species is only 26. These 26 species are from three different families namely Lorisidae, Cercopithecidae and Hylobatidae. The family lorisidae is represented by two species namely slow loris (*Nycticebus bengalensis*) and slender loris (*Loris lydekkerianus*). Similarly, hylobatidae family also have two representative species in India i.e. western Hoolock gibbon (*Hoolock hoolock*) and eastern Hoolock gibbon (*Hoolock leuconedys*). The cercopithecidae family has two sub-families i.e. Colobinae or leaf eating monkeys and cercopithecinae or cheek pouch monkeys. In India we have 13 colobine species viz. Golden langur (*Trachypithecus geei*), Capped langur (*Trachypithecus pileatus*), Phayre's leaf monkey (*Trachypithecus obscurus phayrei*) and Nilgiri langur (*Trachypithecus johnii*), Himalayan grey langur (*Semnopithecus ajax*), Lesser Hill langur (*Semnopithecus hector*), Central Himalayan langur (*Semnopithecus schistaceus*), Bengal Hanuman langur (*Semnopithecus entellus*), Western Hanuman langur (*Semnopithecus acheson*), and Deccan Hanuman langur (*Semnopithecus anchises*). The 9 species of the subfamily cercopithecinae are Bonnet macaque (*Macaca radiata*), Long tailed macaque (*Macaca fascicularis*), Lion tailed macaque (*Macaca silenus*), Assamese macaque (*Macaca assamensis*), Pigtailed macaque (*Macaca leonina*), Rhesus macaque (*Macaca mulatta*), Stump-tailed macaque (*Macaca arctoides*), Arunachal macaque (*Macaca munzala*) and White cheeked macaque (*Macaca leucogeny*).



Adult male

Adult male female

Photo by: Udayan Borthakur

Among the non-human primates, gibbons, commonly referred as small apes occupies unique place from diverse aspects. They are close to human in intelligence and social structure. Human shares 95% of its genetic makeup with Gibbons and differ from them by about 5% of DNA. Depending on the species, adult weight ranges between 5 -10 kg. All gibbon including Hoolocks are frugivores, monogamous, territorial and canopy dwellers. They emit elaborate calls commonly referred as "gibbon song" which can be heard upto 2km. A family group of gibbons generally consists of a monogamous adult pair and their offspring. The offspring leaves their parent once they are sexually matured to establish their own territory.

Gibbons play a vital role in the ecosystem. Because fruit is such a prominent part of their daily diet gibbons are important dispersers of undigested fruit seeds and are therefore integral to maintaining forest health.

Till now 20 species of gibbons have been identified in their distribution range in Indo-Malayan region. As mentioned above India have two species of gibbons and these two species –Western Hoolock gibbon and Eastern Hoolock gibbon represent ape group in the country. Interestingly distribution of gibbons in India is restricted to the seven states of northeast India, including Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland and Mizoram . Even in this region their distribution is further limited to the southern bank of the Dibang-Brahmaputra Rivers system. All the above seven states are habitat states of Western Hoolock gibbon but the occurrence of the Eastern Hoolock gibbon is confined to specific localities in eastern Arunachal Pradesh and a small forest pocket in Sadiya Sub division of Assam. The estimated abundance of the Western Hoolock gibbon in India is up to +7,000 individuals whereas for Eastern Hoolock gibbon it is upto +3,500 individuals

The Tropical wet evergreen, tropical semi-evergreen and the sub tropical moist deciduous forests are the primary habitats of Hoolock gibbon. Being an exclusively arboreal and true brachiator species Hoolock depends on the high canopy coverage in their habitats. Thirty eight protected areas (sanctuaries, national parks and proposed sanctuaries) in northeast India covering 8337.37 sq.km. area support Hoolock gibbons. Moreover, there are groups of Hoolock gibbon in reserved forest, community forest and village woodlands. In different habitats, Hoolock gibbon co-exists with other primate species. In India gibbons share their habitats with Slow loris, Rhesus macaque, Assamese macaque, Stump-tailed macaque, Pigtailed macaque, Capped langur and Phayre's leaf monkey. An association of Hoolock gibbon with highest six other primate species have been observed in Hoollongapar Gibbon wildlife sanctuary in Assam.

Among the primates, only males and females of Hoolock gibbons exhibit distinct color differentiation and thus it is a unique feature of both the species. Adult male western Hoolock gibbons are black with white eyebrows that turn up at the end and stout pointed beard and a black/ dark brown genital tuft about 2-3 inches long. The adult females are copper tanned in colour with whitish eyebrow band , a whitish face ring that contrast with the darker brown cheeks. Neonates are milky white in colour. Juveniles of both the sexes are black with white eyebrows. Females turn gray to tan colour in sub-adult stage but males retain the black colour till adulthood. There is no marked size variations between males and females. In case of eastern Hoolock gibbon males have a white or light rust coloured genital tuft , the white eyebrows

