



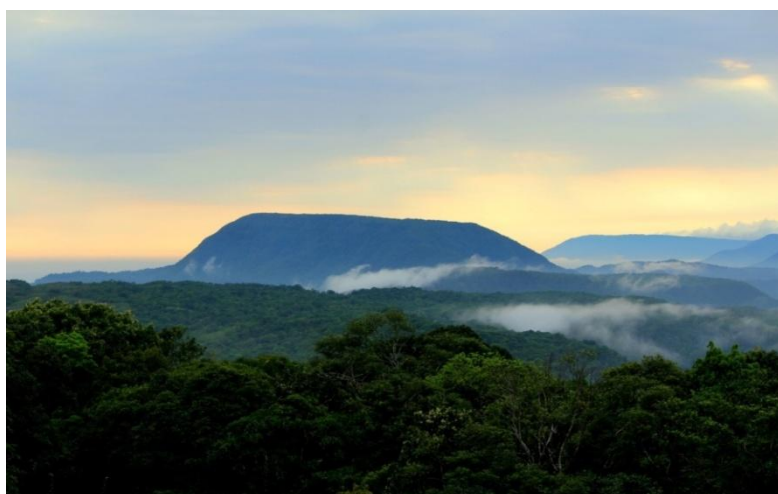
## Balpakram: The abode of Spirits

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The thrill and curiosity of exploring Northeast India never ends and the region never fails to amaze one with its remote and inaccessible terrain with plenty of surprises to be discovered each time one steps into the wilderness. The Balpakram Landscape nestled in the Garo hills of the state of Meghalaya are amongst those few places in the Northeast which are still in a state of seclusion and best preserved by the native communities of the region. The picturesque view of the landscape presents a scintillating theatre and leaves the viewer awestruck at their very first visit. Meghalaya is dominated by three ethnic tribes, viz the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia/Pnar situated in the three hill regions of the state. Mostly when we recall a visit to Meghalaya, we often mention Mawsynram the wettest place on the Earth which lies in the Khasi Hills, but what we don't know is that the only two National Parks of the state viz, Balpakram National Park and Nokrek National Park are situated in the Garo Hills region which is lesser known to the world despite being a significant ecosystem in terms of biodiversity conservation.



*Figure 1: Chutmang Peak, Balpakram National Park*

The Balpakram landscape locates between 25°08'–25°23'N latitude and 90°37'–90°58' E longitude. The southern fringe of landscape forms the international boundary with Bangladesh and is a catchment area for the Surma river which is a lifeline to Bangladesh. The highest peak of the landscape

Chutmang/Chit mang peak (1150m) is also the second highest peak in the Garo Hills. The landscape is a heterogeneous mosaic of Protected Areas (PAs), Reserve Forests (RFs) and Community Forests (CFs), areas under slash-and-burn shifting cultivation (locally known as



jhum), monoculture plantations and human habitations. Historically, prior to being a Protected Area, Balpakram Landscape was inhabited by small hamlets in and around interspersed with forests and jhum cultivation, but keeping in mind the species diversity and richness of the landscape the Government of India proposed to the villagers for the formation of the Balpakram National Park with appropriate relocations and resettlement plans keeping aside some part of their land. Balpakram National Park is one of its kind in the country as the entire National Park was purchased by the Government of India from the local landowners through outright purchases with compensations and notified in 1986 under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. When the park was purchased, it had many settlements in the regions today categorized as core area, therefore the forests we witness today inside the park are a mix of primary and secondary forests which were mostly jhum fallow lands of 25-30 years of age.

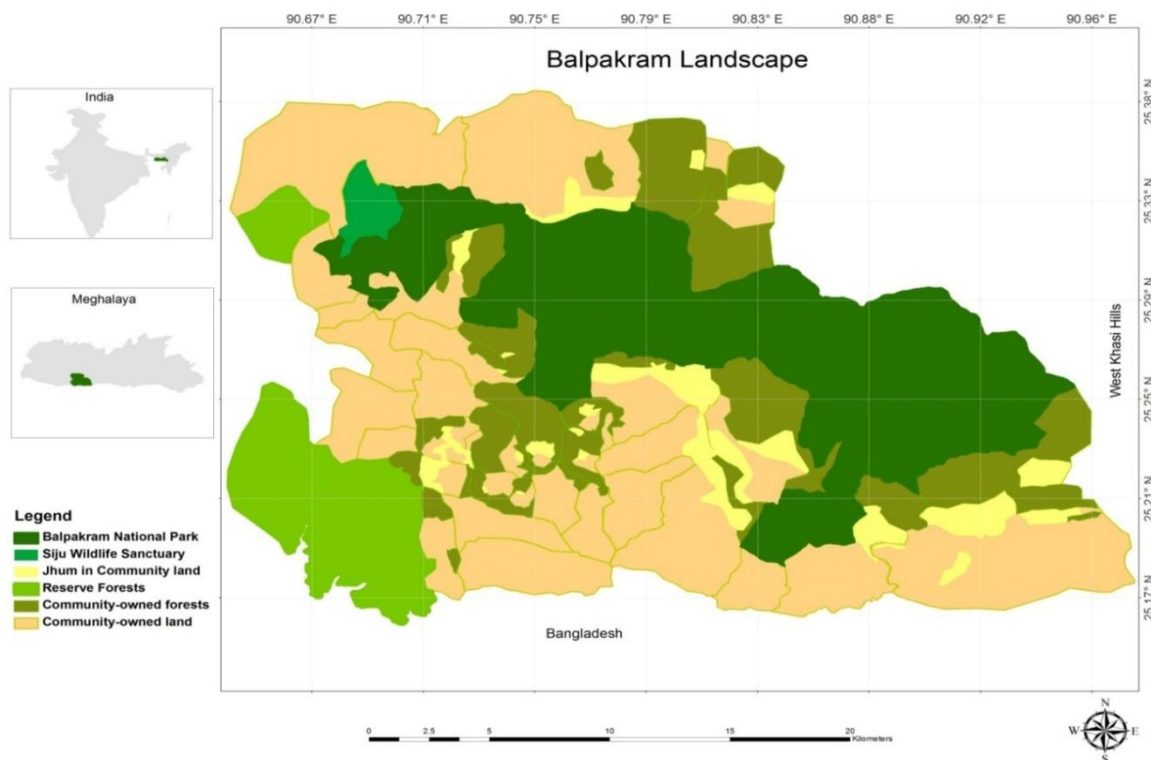


Figure 2: Map of Balpakram Landscape showing the constituent areas

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Geomorphologically, the Balpakram plateau is a part of the Meghalayan plateau which is an extension of the Indian Deccan Peninsular block of the Rajmahal Hills separated by the Malda gap and represents remnant of an ancient plateau of Pre Cambrian-Indian shield block. The oldest known rocks in the region comprises the 'Archean Group' of about 3600 million years. The entire landscape is dominated by Karst topography forming several caves and crevices with fossilized rocks and coal beds adding to its economic significance to the country. The landscape presents a spectacular view of undulating hills, tablelands and deep gorges. The deepest gorge amongst them is the Mahadeo gorge (locally known as Kundulgop) with over 600 m drop. The presence Grasslands interspersed with the Shola Forest patches in the landscape which is a typical feature of Peninsular vegetation shows its geological continuity with the Deccan Peninsular block. The shola forests play a significant role in the region as majority of the region is a tableland/plateau which faces a water stress during the winter season these shola forests serves as important water sources in the form of small rivulets for the wildlife around forming a perfect shelter for the animals.

### **The Biodiversity Hub:**

The Tropical Lowland Evergreen Rainforests are regarded as one of the most diverse terrestrial ecosystems on earth due to its elevations and high diversity of fruiting trees and shows great diversity of faunal species (Whitmore, 1984). These forests occur around the equator and extend between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn comprising of the Amazon basin, Congo basin and the South-East Asian regions but recent studies have confirmed that the lowland rainforests of Meghalaya represent the westernmost limit of the rainforests north of the Tropic of Cancer (Shankar & Tripathi, 2017). The Garo Hills are part of the Indo Malayan Biodiversity Hotspot and harbours a range of endangered species of flora and fauna, the area falls under Bio-geographical Province 4.09.04 (Burma monsoon forest) described by Champion and Seth (1968). It represents bio-geographical unit 9B-



Meghalaya hills in the North East India as described by (1988) Panwar & Rodgers. Both primary and secondary stands of Tropical Moist Evergreen Forest, Tropical Semi-evergreen Forest and Tropical Moist Deciduous Forest, as defined by Champion & Seth (1968), occur here, as do grasslands, shola and riparian forests and degraded land (Kumar & Rao 1985).

### **Vegetation types of Balpakram Landscape:**

Owing to the remoteness of the landscape and the difficult terrain and topography not much detailed scientific studies on faunal diversity of the area have been carried out. The only detailed survey of mammals conducted in Balpakram Landscape using Camera traps (2012-2015) documented a total of 53 mammalian species of which twenty-one are carnivores (Kakati & Srikant,2015). It holds one of the largest and most-threatened populations of Asian Elephant (*Elephas maximus*) and is one of the notified Elephant Reserve (Garo Hills Elephant Reserve) of the country. Other large herbivores documented are the Gaur (*Bos gaurus*), Sambar (*Rus unicolor*) and Red Serow (*Capricornis rubidus*). Although Tigers were historically recorded in the park, currently no evidence have been collected for its presence, other large carnivores here are the Clouded leopard (*Neofelis nebulosa*), Leopard (*Panthera pardus*) and Himalayan Black Bear (*Ursus arctos*). The study also obtained the first camera-trap record in India of the Small toothed palm civet (*Arctogalida trivirgata*). Best known for its primate diversity due to its contiguous forest canopies, the landscape harbours seven species of primates of which Hoolock Gibbons are endangered under IUCN Red List and stump-tailed macaques are best cited here. Amongst other taxa, so far 26 species of amphibians, 45 species of reptiles and 347 species of birds and 348 species of butterflies have been recorded (Samrakshan Trust 2013).



**Figure 3: Awlets mud puddling**



**Figure 4: Tokay gecko**





*Figure 5: Amphiesma sp.*



*Figure 5: Capped Langur*

### **Fossilized Limestones: Mahadek/Mahadeo Formation:**

The Balpakram landscape forms the part of the Mahadek/Mahadeo Formation. These formations from late cretaceous period have been found with rocks that show the preservation of trace fossil Thalassinoides. Some dinosaur bones were found along with well-preserved foraminifers, echinoids, molluscs and plant fossils in these formations. The event of marine transgression was recognized in the Mahadeo Formation during Late Cretaceous period. The cretaceous anoxic event of no oxygen presence in the environment was well represented by the black shale-pyritic and fossil wood of the Mahadeo Formation (Tewari et al. 2010).

### **The interaction between Culture and Conservation:**

The Garos are believed to be migrated from of Tibeto-Burman region around 400 BC, and find their origin from Tibet (referred to as Tibotgre). Their origin history is still a matter of debate with couple of versions apart from the one mentioned above. They have an intricate clan based social organization which is matrilineal and matriarchal one in practice. They are ethnically known as *Songsareks* and follow the practices which majorly includes reverence and worship of nature and natural forces making them animist by nature. Currently, The *Songsareks* have turned into minority within the region due to various external and internal factors but despite the conversions the traditional practices and beliefs are still being followed by the locals. The *Songsareks* beliefs and faiths play a prominent role in protection and conservation of the entire ecological system of the landscape as they find every element of nature to be a representation of a deity of worship making it scared and far away from interference. The cultural association of the Garos with the nature represents an amazing relationship of interlinkages between human and environment making both an intricate part of the system and demonstrates a model of coexistence of human and wildlife.



This human-nature association of Balpakram landscape is a striking feature which shows us another dimension of conservation practices. There are many locations in and around Balpakram National Park which represents the cultural beliefs of the community, for instance the Balpakram plateau is believed to be the abode of their ancestral spirits who travel to the place after death and stay there until they are reincarnated. The families of the demised person take care of all the necessities to living along with utensils and livestock depending upon their status to be provided at the cremation ground with a belief that the spirit of the dead will make a journey to Balpakram and spend rest of its time there till rebirth. Yes, I know this seems quite similar to the discoveries of the Harappan Civilization wherein the cremations were found with essential items along with animals. The whole *Balpakram plateau and gorge* region is hence immensely revered by the locals as their ancestral residence and itself serves as a reason for not to be disturbed in any way by extending their protection. Another place of such reverence is *Ganchisoram- Three hillocks*, a place which marks the funeral sites of tribal ancestors wherein Captain Williamson Sangma, the founder and first Chief Minister of the state walked-in to pay his tribute and gratitude to the ancestors when Meghalaya was granted statehood in 1972. *Mebit- Mebang- the oracle rock* situated inside the park is believed to give prophecy based on the pebble's direction for the next jhum opening as blessed by the goddess of crop *Rukhmini*. *Chidimak-the black pool*, a small pool inside the park is considered the bathing spot for the travelling spirits before they reach the final destination i.e., the Balpakram plateau. The pool water is said to be black as it contains the dirt from bathing. The Chutmang Hills, is also revered by the locals and believed to be almighty and powerful deity to them, people still visit the site and provide their offerings to the Chutmang at the base in a *Kosi* (a pile of stones used as a medium to communicate their prayers to the deities). People tend to stay out of these forests not just out of respect but also fear of bringing an ill omen if they disturb the natural setup of the environment. Usually, game hunting is not done and trees are not cut unless it's a necessity and the villagers follow certain protocols for the same. This fear of humans to nature has kept them at a distance from nature and its elements which helps the ecological system to function in its own pace.

These beliefs and faiths have somewhat created an insulation covering the whole landscape isolating it from outer world and protecting it from influences of changes keeping it intact in a way they can have it for eternity. This surely is beneficial to the conservation policies as this factor alone adds up to the efforts of the respective authority in protection and conservation of the landscape and its biodiversity. No denial that we need development in an inclusive way



but we need to rethink on our efforts wherein we can balance development and Environment without which the long-term sustenance of the ecological system is quite unimaginable at the current pace of change. The Balpakram landscape can be cited as an example of how one can balance development with lifestyle taking both human needs and nature's need hand in hand. This positive association highlights the role of community and their cultural believes in biodiversity conservation.

### **The run for UNESCO World Heritage Tag:**

The mesmerizing beauty and lush green forests of Balpakram is not just a hub for biodiversity but also represents the human nature association at its best form. The occurrence of fossils in the region plays a significant role in understanding the historical and ongoing geomorphological process of the Earth. And together these three elements, biodiversity, geomorphology and human-nature association has been recognized by the of UNESCO World Heritage Site as Outstanding Universal Values (OUV) of Balpakram Landscape along with Nokrek Biosphere Reserve also known as the Garo Hills Conservation Area (GHCA) and was added to the tentative list of UNESCO World Heritage Site under the mixed category in 2018. The preparation of the dossier for the proposed site is in pipeline. The Nokrek National Park is a UNESCO biosphere reserve under Man and Biodiversity Programme declared as National Gene Sanctuary by UNESCO in 2009, known to harbor the germplasm of Wild Indian Orange *Citrus indica* conserved in-situ for all the other wild varieties of citrus fruits. Balpakram Landscape and Nokrek Biosphere Reserve are connected through a narrow stretch of green corridors making it a chain complex.

### **Way Forward:**

It is important for us to understand that like Balpakram Landscape there are many more landscapes throughout the country which are lesser known but that does not reduce the value of the region for their role in the ecosystem services are significant. The current trend in conservation biology of conditional conservation schemes/policies for certain species or landscapes which has brought many success stories to frontline highlights the importance of targeted efforts in a unidirectional way for a species-specific policy but in turn also throws light on the future perspectives of all those left out species or landscapes from the list of priority. The list of left out species and landscapes are longer than the one on the list which highlights the other side of the coin which seems grim. Failing to recognize the ecological and geological importance of places like Balpakram shows the gaps in our policies and



strategies of conservation which needs a deeper look through as going unrecognized will give an easy hand to all those waiting for an opportunity to exploit the natural resources of the region.

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