

Two Nights in Chimitap – a field note

Kamal Medhi*

Stepping into Chimitap, my first reaction was - WOW!! The place is fantastic. This one *Aking* (clan land), at least, has good forest cover, less of orchards and *jhum* with a seven-year fallow cycle. It shares the trend of rich biodiversity with the rest of the state. In our single day there, I saw around thirty species of birds, including a couple of Yellow-throated Martins, and a troop of Rhesus Macaque, in the forest right at the edge of a settlement. A highly ecologically sensitive area, it is definitely worth it to put in an effort for conservation here. Chimitap has an area of around 20 km², sharing its northern boundary with Balpakram National Park. It has three habitations, locally known as *gittim*, housing around a hundred Garo families.

One question puzzled me from the time I entered the *Aking* - 'How does this *Aking* have such few orchards?' I put this question, a couple of times, to my colleague- Rollingstone, and many times to Wildren who accompanied us there. I did make a guess, which later turned out to be correct - the Government has not reached here yet. Unfortunately, most of the schemes implemented by the Government are towards promotion of monoculture plantation, in the name of soil conservation, water conservation, to control *jhum* and so on. These schemes are implemented, in the name of sustainable development, without due consideration of the true needs of conservation. Forests are losing ground day by day. Even people of this *Aking* are now desperate to have orchards on their land, because they consider this, which they have seen elsewhere, as the only solution to their *jungithang* (livelihood) issues.

I was very excited to be in this *Aking*, and walked across the forest to the park boundary. However, instead of enjoying it completely, I found myself worrying about how this natural resource cannot possibly compete with orchards. The entire northern belt of the *Aking*, along the Balpakram boundary, has good forest cover and fulfils every single need of the *Chimitapian*. We stayed with a family in a Chimitap *gittim* and, as usual, we chatted with the villagers by the fireside, after dinner. I had many questions to ask, pent up during the whole day. Where do they get fuel-wood, thatch, bamboo and even *mesu* (vegetable) from? Everything is from the forest around them, and there is enough of it. Nobody in the village has ever slept without food; I didn't see a single child suffering from malnutrition around. Why, then, do they say that the Government has not done anything for them? Yes, of course, I have not seen any electricity connections, nor solar panels, proper water supply or sanitation facilities. When will we think out of the box, and do proper planning for sustainable utilization of natural resources, and safeguarding wildlife habitats, rather than trying to *paint the whole country with a single brush*?

Most of the forest in the *Aking* is inaccessible to the villagers, but not to the loggers. There has been felling

of trees on a massive scale along the park boundary, by the people of neighbouring *Akings*. Most of them are commissioned by the traders with Bangladesh links. During our visit, we mobilized around two dozen villagers, including the *Aking Nokma* (clan leader who handles administration in the *Aking* land), and forest guards, and visited the area where logging is going on. We chanced upon five loggers from neighbouring *Akings*, and they will now be judged under the communal judiciary (*Nokma* Association).

I learned a lot from this action. For a sustainable conservation effort, people around the forest should have a better understanding about the issues. It is also a matter of leadership - if the *Nokma* is in your favour, the battle is half won. This is what happens in *Chimitap*, everybody listen to the *Nokma*, and the *Nokma* is in our favour. This could provide a possible way to resolve other issues, like hunting, wildlife pets and even developmental schemes. A communal push for strategic action is the only solution. Massive tree felling in community owned land.



Forest cover in Chimitap Aking. Photo:Tripp Burwell



Massive tree felling in community owned land
Photo by Tripp Burwell

*Team Leader, Samrakshan Trust, Meghalaya