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1 **Association between intrinsic disorder and serine/threonine phosphorylation in**

2 *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*

3 Gajinder Pal Singh

4 School of Biotechnology,

5 KIIT University, Campus-XI, Patia, Bhubaneswar 751024,

6 Odisha, India

7 Tel : +91 674 2725732

8 Email: gajinder.pal.singh@gmail.com

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22 **Abstract**

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24 Serine/threonine phosphorylation is an important mechanism to regulate protein function. In
25 eukaryotes phosphorylation occurs predominantly in intrinsically disordered regions of proteins.
26 While serine/threonine phosphorylation and protein disorder are much less prevalent in
27 prokaryotes, *M. tuberculosis* has both high serine/threonine phosphorylation and disorder. Here I
28 show that, similar to eukaryotes, serine/threonine phosphorylation sites in *M. tuberculosis* are
29 highly enriched in intrinsically disordered regions, indicating similarity in substrate recognition
30 mechanism of eukaryotic and *M. tuberculosis* kinases. Serine/threonine phosphorylation has
31 been linked to the pathogenicity and survival of *M. tuberculosis*, thus better understanding of
32 how its kinases recognize their substrates could have important implications in understanding
33 and controlling the biology of this deadly pathogen.

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45 **Introduction**

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47 Reversible phosphorylation of serine and threonine residues is a widespread post-translational
48 modification in eukaryotes, with more than a third of proteins phosphorylated during their
49 lifetime [1]. Phosphorylation can modify protein interactions, enzyme function, localization or
50 degradation. While traditionally, regulation and signal transduction in bacteria was thought to be
51 mediated by histidine and aspartate phosphorylation in two-component systems, recently the
52 occurrence and importance of phosphorylation of serine/threonine (S/T) residues has gained
53 much attention [2–4]. Large scale mass-spectrometry based analysis has revealed S/T
54 phosphorylation in a number of bacteria [2]. *M. tuberculosis* shows the highest rates of
55 phosphorylation among studied bacteria with 8 % of the proteins identified as phosphorylated
56 [5].

57

58 One of the most interesting findings about serine/threonine phosphorylation in eukaryotes is its
59 association with intrinsically disordered regions[6–11]. Intrinsically disordered regions lack a
60 well-defined three-dimensional structure and are characterized by low content of hydrophobic
61 amino acids and high net charge [12]. These characteristic physiochemical properties allow
62 accurate prediction of disordered regions across proteomes [13]. Disordered regions are often
63 associated with binding to multiple partners in a transient manner [14–19]. These regions may
64 undergo disorder to order transition upon binding, with decrease in conformational entropy. This
65 uncouples binding affinity and specificity, allowing highly specific interactions to be reversible
66 [20,21]. It has been proposed that due to high surface accessibility and transient mode of
67 interactions, disordered regions are ideally suited for regulation by reversible phosphorylation

68 [6,7,20,21]. Disordered regions are highly abundant in eukaryotes with about a third of the
69 proteins predicted to have at least one long (> 30 residues) disordered region and about 19 % of
70 the residues in disordered state [22]. In contrast, most bacteria have much less disorder in their
71 proteome, with about 4% proteins with long disordered regions and about 6% disordered
72 residues [22]. The association between disorder and serine/threonine phosphorylation has not
73 been investigated in prokaryotes.

74
75 Among bacteria, *M. tuberculosis* has one of the highest disorder content, with about 10 %
76 disordered residues [22]. Thus, *M. tuberculosis* has both high level of S/T phosphorylation and
77 disorder content. This prompted me to ask whether the association seen between S/T
78 phosphorylation and disorder in eukaryotes might be present in *M. tuberculosis*, which indeed
79 was found to be the case.

81 **Materials and Methods**

82 Data on *M. tuberculosis* phosphoproteins and phosphosites was obtained from Prusic *et al.* [5].
83 This study identified 301 phosphoproteins and 500 S/T phosphorylation events. For 215 of these
84 sites, the specific residue that was modified could be identified with high confidence. *M.*
85 *tuberculosis* proteome was obtained from Tuberculist database [23]. For disorder prediction I
86 utilized IUPred program [24]. IUPred method is based on the observation that disordered regions
87 do not form sufficient favorable interactions to fold, and thus have high estimated energy content
88 [25]. I also utilized ESpritz program [26], which is conceptually different from IUPred. This
89 method is machine learning based predictor which was trained on experimentally characterized
90 disordered regions (missing regions in X-ray structures in PDB). I also used MFDp2 disorder

91 prediction tool, which is an ensemble disorder prediction tool [27,28]. Secondary structure
92 prediction was done at Network Protein Sequence Analysis (NPSA) server [29] using consensus
93 approach [30]. To calculate statistical significance of enrichment of pS/T sites in disordered and
94 loop regions, I also used randomization test. For example, 84 pS/T sites are observed as
95 disordered by IUPred program out of total 215 pS/T. For testing enrichment, I randomly selected
96 equal number of S/T sites from each phosphoprotein as observed (1000 randomizations), and
97 counted number of randomizations in which 84 or more sites were observed in disordered
98 regions. This was not observed in any of 1000 randomization; hence p -value is less than $1e-3$.
99 To analyze conservation of S/T sites, seven mycobacterium genus were chosen which are least
100 similar to *M. tuberculosis* with respect to BLAST sequence similarity score (*Mycobacterium sp.*
101 *MCS*, *M. vanbaalenii*, *M. smegmatis*, *M. chubuense*, *Mycobacterium sp. JDM601*, *M. gilvum* and
102 *M. abscessus*). Orthologs of *M. tuberculosis* in mycobacteria were identified using reciprocal
103 best blast approach [31], and aligned using Clustal Omega [32]. Alignment positions with gaps
104 were excluded from the analyses. Out of 215 sites, 135 sites were present in proteins with
105 orthologs in all 7 species. Of these 135, 103 sites were without gaps using Clustal Omega.
106 Positions with replacement of serine with threonine and vice-versa were considered as
107 conserved. Phosphosite data for other bacteria was obtained from respective publications [33–
108 40].

109

110 **Results**

111 Mass-spectrometry based analysis had previously revealed 301 phosphoproteins in *M.*
112 *tuberculosis* with 500 S/T phosphorylation sites [5]. First, I tested whether phosphoproteins in
113 *M. tuberculosis* are more likely to be disordered (i.e. have long (≥ 30 residues) disordered

114 regions). I utilized IUPred program to predict disordered regions at the proteome wide level [25].
115 Phosphoproteins are about twice as likely to be disordered compared to non-phosphoproteins
116 (29.6 % vs. 13.4% respectively, Fisher p 4e-12). Since longer proteins are also more likely to
117 have long disordered regions, I tested whether phosphoproteins have higher percentage of
118 disordered residues. Phosphoproteins also have higher percentage of disordered residues
119 compared to non-phosphoproteins (16.7% vs. 12.0% respectively, two tailed t-test p 3e-5).

120
121 Out of 500 phosphorylation events detected in *M. tuberculosis*, the phosphoresidue could be
122 identified for 215 sites with high confidence [5]. For these sites, I tested whether phosphorylated
123 S/T (pS/T) residues are more likely to be disordered compared to non-phosphorylated S/T
124 (npS/T) residues from the same set of proteins. Overall 39.1% of pS/T sites are disordered
125 compared to 22.4% of npS/T sites (Fisher test p 6e-8 and randomization test p < 1e-3, Figure 1).
126 The results are very similar when another disorder prediction method, Espiritz[26] was used
127 (52.6% pS/T disordered compared to 27.8% npS/T sites, Fisher test p 8e-14, randomization test p
128 <1e-3, Figure 1). A more recent disorder predictor MFDp2 [27,28] also gives similar results
129 (43.7% pS/T disordered compared to 19.9 % npS/T sites, Fisher test p 6e-15, randomization test
130 p <1e-3, Figure 1). Disordered regions are also characterized by high irregular secondary
131 structure (coil regions). Thus, I tested whether pS/T residues are enriched in coil regions of
132 proteins. pS/T residues are more likely to occur in predicted coil regions compared to npS/T
133 residues (70.2% pS/T sites in coil compared to 55.7% npS/T sites in coil, Fisher test p 2e-5 and
134 randomization test p <1e-3, Figure 2). There is also depletion of pS/T residues in beta-sheet
135 regions (4.2% pS/T sites in sheet compared to 11.3% npS/T sites in sheet, Fisher test p 4e-4 and
136 randomization test p <1e-3, Figure 2), while no significant difference was found for helix regions

137 (22.8% pS/T sites in helix compared to 27.1 % npS/T sites in helix, Fisher test p 0.2 and
138 randomization test p 0.12, Figure 2).

139
140 Disordered regions evolve faster than ordered regions [41], but pS/T residues evolve slower than
141 npS/T in eukaryotes [42,43], so I tested whether *M. tuberculosis* pS/T and npS/T differ in
142 conservation among seven mycobacterial proteomes (see methods). Conservation of pS/T is not
143 significantly different from npS/T residues among these mycobacterial proteins (5.0 species vs.
144 5.2 species respectively using, Wilcox test p 0.92, number pS/T sites 103). Separately analyzing
145 disordered and ordered sites does not reveal significant difference in conservation between pS/T
146 and npS/T sites (Wilcox p 0.85 and 0.87 respectively). Thus pS/T are not more conserved than
147 npS/T among mycobacteria.

148
149 Prisic *et al.*[5] conducted *in vitro* phosphorylation of 13-mer synthetic peptides corresponding to
150 *in vivo* phosphorylation sites with different purified kinases. They could find phosphorylation of
151 about half of these peptides. I tested the whether different kinases have differential preference for
152 predicted disordered phosphoacceptors. I find that PknA has slightly higher preference for
153 disordered phosphoacceptors than other kinases (Figure 3); however the uncorrected Chi-square
154 test p -value is 0.04. Other kinases show uncorrected p -values > 0.05 .

155

156 **Discussion**

157

158 Here I show the enrichment of localized serine/threonine phosphosites in disordered regions of
159 proteins in *M. tuberculosis*. This preference is similar to that observed in eukaryotes. Association

160 between protein disorder and phosphorylation may offer similar advantages as those proposed in
161 eukaryotes, including binding to multiple partners and transient mode of interaction [6,14–21],
162 which are a prerequisite for regulatory interactions. Thus *M. tuberculosis* and eukaryotic
163 serine/threonine phosphorylation dependent regulation may be more similar than generally
164 appreciated. While most bacteria have low amount of protein disorder, *M. tuberculosis* has high
165 disorder content. I suggest that high disorder content might be the reason for association between
166 disorder and phosphorylation in *M. tuberculosis*. This suggestion is supported by the observation
167 that other bacteria with high disorder content (*Streptomyces coelicolor* and *Halobacterium*
168 *salinarum*) also show association between disorder and S/T phosphorylation, but bacteria with
169 low disorder content do not (Supplemental Table 1) except for *Thermus thermophilus*, where
170 enrichment of phosphorylation in disordered regions with marginal statistical significance was
171 observed (Supplemental Table 1). Previously, a large fraction of phosphosites in *Thermus*
172 *thermophilus* were observed in loop regions [44], albeit the statistical test for enrichment was not
173 performed.

174
175 I find that PknA has a slightly higher preference for disordered phosphoacceptor sites on
176 synthetic 13-mer substrate peptides under *in vitro* conditions than other kinases (Figure 3).
177 However these results should be taken with the caveat that the structure of a peptide in *in vitro*
178 conditions might be very different from the *in vivo* structure in the context of the full protein.
179 Thus differential preferences of different kinases towards disordered substrates under *in vivo*
180 conditions remain an open question.

181

182 I did not find pS/T sites to be more conserved than npS/T sites among mycobacteria, this
183 suggests that phosphorylation network in mycobacteria evolves fast and may contribute towards
184 niche specific adaptation. Important questions for future include, whether disordered and ordered
185 S/T phosphosites are functionally different, and whether different kinases differ in their
186 preference for disorder in their substrates under physiological conditions. Incorporation of
187 disorder information might also be useful to predict novel S/T phosphosites [45], as has been
188 shown in eukaryotes [6,46]. S/T kinases and their substrates have been linked to the survival,
189 pathogenesis and virulence of *M. tuberculosis* [3,47,48], thus these finding may facilitate
190 understanding the basic biology this deadly pathogen.
191

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Figure Legends

328 **Figure 1. Phosphorylated serine/threonine sites in *M. tuberculosis* are more likely to be**

329 **disordered.** Both phosphorylated and non-phosphorylated serine/threonine sites are from
330 the same set of proteins. The disorder was predicted using IUPred, Espiritz and MFDp2
331 methods. The Fisher test *p* values are 6e-8, 8e-14 and 6e-15 respectively. pS/T -
332 phosphorylated serine/threonine, npS/T- non-phosphorylated serine/threonine.

333

334 **Figure 2. Association between predicted secondary structure and phosphorylation of**

335 **serine/threonine sites in *M. tuberculosis*.** Phosphorylated serine/threonine sites occur
336 preferentially in coil regions, while being significantly depleted in sheet regions and show
337 no significant difference in helix regions. The Fisher test *p* values are 2e-5, 4e-4 and 0.2
338 respectively. pS/T -phosphorylated serine/threonine, npS/T- non-phosphorylated
339 serine/threonine.

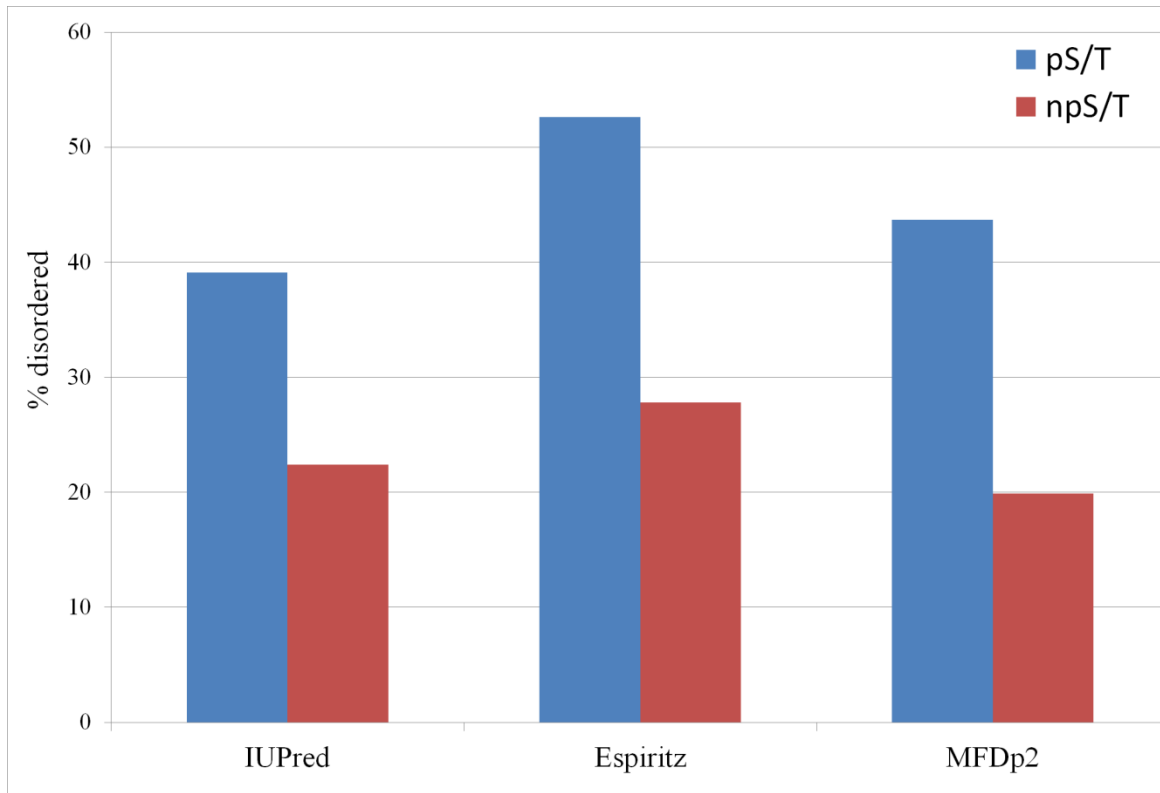
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341 **Figure 3. Percentage of disordered phosphoacceptors are shown for different kinases.** The

342 phosphorylation was carried out by purified kinases under in vitro conditions on synthetic
343 13-mer peptides corresponding to in vivo phosphorylation sites (Prisic et al.). Uncorrected
344 Chi-square *p* values were significant (<0.05) only for PknA.

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Figure 1

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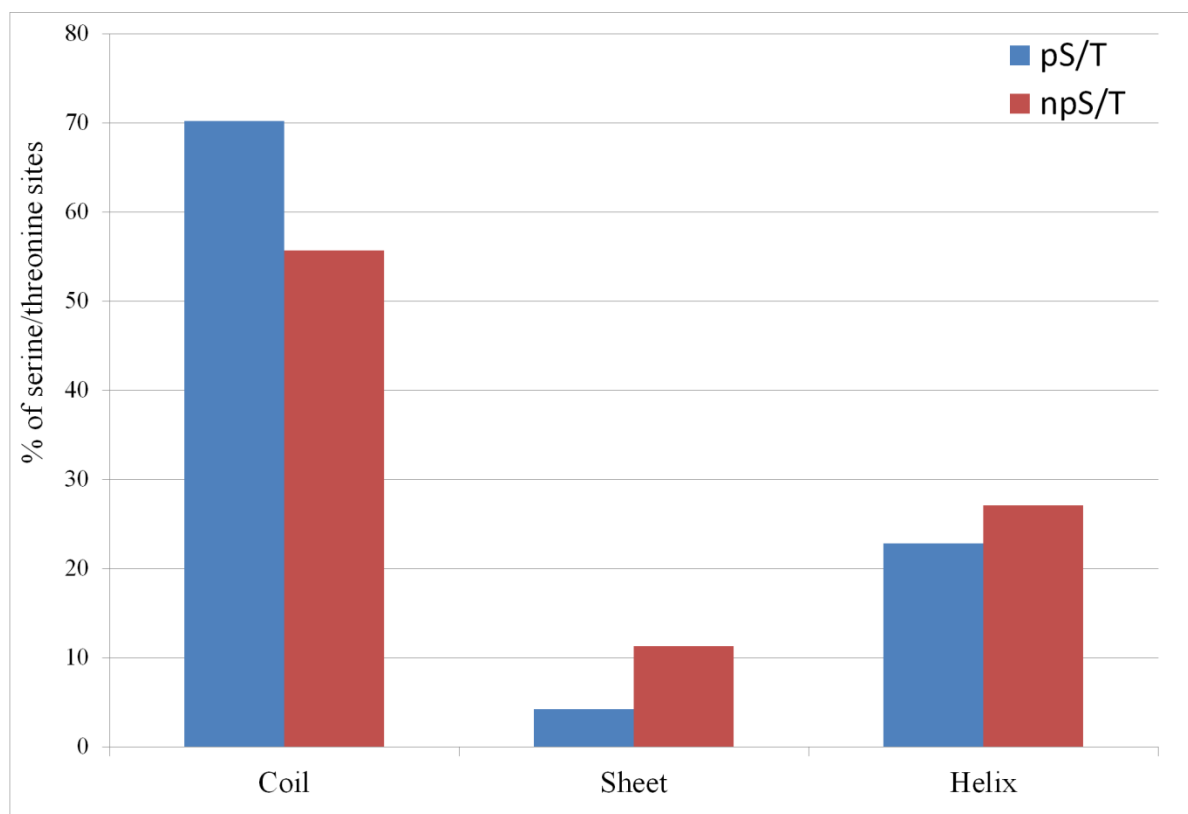
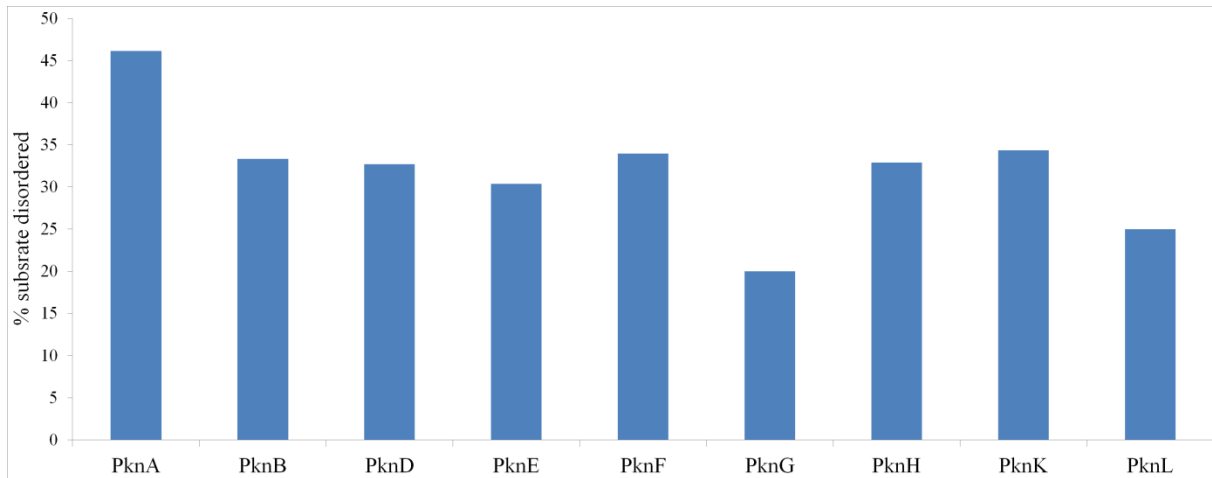


Figure 2



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Figure 3