

Beyond Fear: Biru's Journey Towards Human-Bear Coexistence

The story of a Gaddi shepherd from Chamba, his struggle to survive a bear attack, and the challenges of living alongside wildlife in a changing landscape.

#HumanWildlifeCoexistence #CaseStudy
#HimalayanBlackBear #BearAttackSurvivor

Note: This anecdote and the accompanying photographs are shared with consent of the individual. The name 'Biru' is a pseudonym used to protect his identity.

An Evening That Changed Everything

In mid-November 2025, during the late evening, Biru, a member of the Gaddi community, went into the forest near Odda Village, under Odda Panchayat in Chamba District, Himachal Pradesh, to collect fuelwood to cook dinner. Like many Gaddi families, Biru depends on sheep, goats, and their products for his family's survival throughout the year. His livelihood is closely connected to the forests and mountain landscapes he has known for years.

That evening, he was accompanied by his Bhotiya dog and carried a 'darati' (sickle). While in the forest, he sat down and spoke to

someone on his mobile phone. After finishing the call, he stood up, put his phone into the upper pocket of his coat, and began walking.

Suddenly, a bear attacked him, biting his right shoulder first. According to Biru, two bears were present—one adult and one smaller bear. He suspected that the adult might have been the mother of the younger one. The attack was sudden, leaving him disoriented, unbalanced, and frightened. He was bleeding and struggling to understand what was happening. Despite his fear, he remembered the sickle he was carrying and fought back with it. He also signalled to his dog, whose actions, according to his account, helped him during the encounter.

Biru suffered several serious injuries. He received 21 stitches near his left eye and sustained bite injuries to his right hand and shoulder, an injury to his nose, and deep claw marks across his back. Somehow, he survived.

For Biru, survival was not just a matter of chance. He believes that Lord Shiva protected him that night. During the interview, he also spoke about a traditional belief concerning a boon granted by Lord Shiva to the Gaddi





Top: Biru showing stitches near his left eye. Bottom: Biru with his darati (sickle). © Lakshay Tyagi.

community. His faith became an important part of how he understood and remembered the incident.

The Cost of Surviving

Surviving the attack was only the beginning of Biru's struggle. His treatment and post-treatment care came with considerable expenses. With his family dependent on sheep, goats, and their products for its livelihood, these costs placed a heavy burden on the household.

To manage the expenses, Biru had to sell three of his sheep to a butcher. These were not simply

animals he could afford to lose; they were part of the livelihood on which his family depended

His difficulties did not end with the bear attack. Biru explained that every year, two or three of his sheep die after landslides or by falling from cliffs. For a family that relies on livestock throughout the year, such losses can have a direct impact on its income and ability to meet daily needs.

When asked whether he had received any financial assistance or compensation from the government or the local panchayat following the attack, Biru said he was still waiting. He felt that little was likely to come from the process. He recalled hearing about other people who had survived bear attacks and received only ₹5,000 in compensation, sometimes after completing extensive paperwork and waiting for around eight months. For someone facing immediate medical expenses and the loss of income, such a long wait can be extremely difficult. As Biru pointed out, treatment cannot wait for months. Bills have to be paid, food has to be arranged, and families must continue to survive.

He expressed frustration at the difference between assurances that the government cares for the Gaddi community and the difficulties shepherds face when they need help. In his experience, there was little immediate support, and the burden of managing the consequences fell on the affected person and their family.

His frustration was not directed at bears alone. It was also shaped by the financial pressure,



Biru, a Gaddi shepherd, sharing the realities of living alongside wildlife in the Himalaya.

uncertainty, and difficulties he faced while seeking assistance.

When Fear Turns into Anger

After such a painful experience, Biru's fear of bears was understandable. The attack had left him with serious injuries and a financial burden that threatened the livelihood of his family. He expressed a desire to kill bears, reflecting the anger and helplessness he felt after the encounter.

For someone whose daily life depends on taking livestock into mountain landscapes, the possibility of another encounter can be frightening. Understanding wildlife behaviour does not immediately remove that fear, especially when the consequences of an encounter can be so severe.

Biru's experience also highlighted an important reality: human–wildlife negative interaction is not only about an encounter between a person and an animal. It can affect a family's income, health, security, and sense of safety for months or even years afterwards.

A Conversation About a Changing Landscape

During our conversation, I spoke to Biru about the environmental changes taking place across the Chamba Valley and their possible connections with human–wildlife interactions. We

discussed habitat loss, forest fragmentation, urbanisation, tourism, and other ecological changes that may affect wildlife movement and behaviour.

As forests and natural habitats are altered, wildlife can face changes in the availability of food, shelter, and safe movement routes. Human activities can also bring people and wildlife into closer contact. Although these factors cannot establish the cause of Biru's particular encounter, they are important to consider when discussing human–bear conflict in the region.

We also discussed the need for coexistence: protecting wildlife while ensuring that people who share these landscapes can live and work safely. During the conversation, I noticed a shift in how Biru spoke about bears. He began to consider their situation alongside his own suffering. At one point, he said:

“Bhalu kithe jaan? Bande unhan da ghar-baar te khana-peena sab kujh ujaadi ditta, te bhugatna saanu painda ae.”

“Where will the bears go? Humans have destroyed their homes, food sources, and places to live, and we are the ones who have to suffer the consequences.”

He also reflected that if there were more forests, perhaps bears might not attack people in the same way.

His words did not erase the trauma he had experienced, nor did they mean that his fear had disappeared. But they showed that he was beginning to look at the situation from another perspective. He could recognise that bears, too, depend on a landscape that is changing under human influence.

Beyond Fear: Towards Coexistence

Biru’s story is a reminder that conservation cannot be separated from the lives and livelihoods of local communities. For a Gaddi shepherd, livestock is not merely a source of income; it is the foundation of his family’s survival. When a bear attack results in serious injuries and high medical expenses, the consequences extend far beyond the immediate encounter.

At the same time, bears are part of the mountain ecosystems they inhabit. Protecting them requires us to understand the pressures on their habitats and explore ways to reduce encounters between people and wildlife.

Awareness and conversations can help build understanding, but they are not enough on their own. Shepherds and other people living alongside wildlife also need practical support,

accessible and timely compensation, and effective measures to reduce the risks they face.

Biru survived a frightening encounter, but he was left to bear much of its financial and emotional cost. His story shows why coexistence must involve both sides: protecting wildlife and recognising the hardships of the people who share its habitat.

Sometimes, a conversation cannot change someone’s entire experience. But it can open a small window through which they begin to see things differently. In Biru’s case, that window opened when he began to ask not only why bears attack people, but also where bears can go when their own homes are disappearing.

For human–wildlife coexistence to become a reality, neither people nor wildlife should have to bear the entire cost of sharing the same landscape.

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