

# Amid Kolhapur floods, everyday heroes battled danger to save thousands of lives in rural Maharashtra

As per the India Meteorological Department, it rained 2,389.5 mm rainfall in Kolhapur between 1 June and 28 August, which is 58 percent more than the normal average rainfall for the same period.

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Source: FirstPost- <https://www.firstpost.com/india/amid-kolhapur-floods-everyday-heroes-battled-danger-to-save-thousands-of-lives-in-rural-maharashtra-7291741.html#:~:text=India-,%20Amid%20Kolhapur%20floods%20C%20everyday%20heroes%20battled%20danger%20to%20save%20thousands,%20rainfall%20for%20the%20same%20period.>

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- While Dhulappa Ambi rescued close to 5,500 people on his boat, Narayan Gaikwad, a farmer, kept a record of all the losses.
- Akkatai Teli fearlessly questioned the Maharashtra Cabinet Minister for Revenue and Public Works for the lack of relief and preparedness by the government.
- 12 cab drivers from Pune saved Rs 88,000 and brought biscuits, medicines, clothes, sanitary pads, soaps, drinking water, and many other things for the flood-affected villagers.
- Deepak Suryavanshi, with four other villagers, collectively saved 750 people from the Juni Dhamani village.

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When it came to saving lives or drowning in fear, Dhulappa Ambi chose the former.

It goes back to his childhood days when he almost drowned in the nearby Krishna River. “My father pulled my hair and saved me,” he says smilingly, but equally scared still. From that moment, Dhulappa had a phobia of drowning. But going against his fears, he has been practising the traditional caste-based occupation of a boatman for more than three decades now. “After that incident, I never gathered the courage to learn swimming, but I learned how to drive a boat.”

How do you live with the fear of drowning in flood? “It’s simple. You just don’t think about it,” says Dhulappa. On 6 August, the water started entering the Alas village in Shirol taluka of Maharashtra’s Kolhapur district. The village, which has a population of 6,616 (Census 2011), drowned in the next four days.



*Yogesh, Dhulappa and Gajanan rescued around 5,500 people in the Alas village. All images by the author*

The entire village was dependent only on Dhulappa's help. 45-year-old Dhulappa's only weapons were his old wooden boat and experience. Overcoming his phobia, he used it to save around 5,500 people in a week. What did the rescue operation look like? Dhulappa has no words to describe this. "We saved everyone," is what he says.

Every day at 7 am, he would start rescuing the stranded villagers for the next 12 hours. One round of rescuing meant roving 5 km. "It was important to shift people. The only thing that mattered was saving everyone's life," he says. Every day, Dhulappa, his two sons, Yogesh, 22, and Gajanan, 20, along with a few villagers would at least make nine trips to save almost 500 people.

It was not just saving people's lives, another important task, was keeping the 2,000 stranded cattle alive. "We would at least carry 1,000 kilograms *chara* (fodder) on the 20-foot-long boat for the stranded animals," says Yogesh.

To carry out this back-breaking operation, six to eight villagers would continuously assist the Ambi family in roving. Dhulappa's experience saved the boat several times from wrecking. "We would navigate our way by looking at the fallen poles and trees. It was difficult," says Dhulappa.

On the first day of the flood, they managed to rescue 1,200 people from the village. "A lot of people from other villages helped us by giving the fodder and other required things," says Yogesh. In the evening they would carry this fodder to all the stranded animals. "We would take a tub filled with dry fodder. Many cattle were at least three feet in the water. Since there was no space to keep the tub, we would hold it at least for 30 minutes till the animals had eaten the fodder," explains Yogesh.

The water level was at least eight feet higher than the 2005 flood, say the villagers. In 2005, the entire village didn't drown, but this time it did, killing at least 12 cattle.

Every day the rescue operation would be stopped at 7 pm because of the darkness. Dhulappa and his two sons would then go back to the village and stay at the first floor of a house. "What if an emergency came in the night? We stayed back to ensure no one dies," says Dhulappa. There was no electricity in the Alas village for 13 days. To take care of the stranded cattle, around 1,000 farmers had stayed back in the village. The toughest task for the Ambi family was rescuing senior citizens and patients. "The villagers would pull the bullock cart with patients and older citizens in the water. The big boat couldn't reach every house and so the bullock cart helped bring them towards us," says Yogesh.

How do you save thousands of people with a single 20 feet long boat? "With just two *kathi* (sticks) and four *haule* (oars) to propel the boat," says Yogesh.



*After a weeklong rescue operation, Gajanan parked the boat in Krishna river on 17 August*

Gajanan says, "For the first time, I got a chance to save so many people. We didn't even use a life jacket." The gram panchayat at Alas only had one life jacket. This was used for emergency cases while rescuing. The National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) reached almost six days later to rescue people. "They stayed for 1.5 days after which the water started receding. The entire responsibility was on us. Their small boats couldn't accompany more than seven people in one round," says Gajanan.

In 2005, Dhulappa and his father, the late Narsingha Ambi, helped save at least 3,500 people from the Alas village. "It took us five days in 2005 to save everyone, but this time it took us almost seven-eight days," says Dhulappa.

Dhulappa's is the third and last generation in the Ambi family to continue the traditional occupation of a boatman. "I have to work as an agricultural labourer to make ends meet. You can't survive on this occupation," he says.

People who commute on his boat, give him around 3 kg *tandul* (rice) and 5 kg jowar (sorghum) yearly. "How can I run my family with it?" he asks. The Ambi is listed under the Nomadic Tribe (NT-B) category in Maharashtra. Every day, he fares people from the bank of the Krishna River in Alas village to Akiwat village. Each trip takes about 20 minutes. "Even if there's a single passenger, I fare them," he says.

He doesn't shift to the motorboat because of the cost and maintenance. "How will I manage the petrol for a motorboat? Someone from Pune said that they will appeal to raise a motorboat for me. Let's see what happens," he says.

A lot of people remained stranded because they had assumed that the water wouldn't surpass the 2005 flood level. "None of us were prepared for this," says Yogesh. "The 1989 flood was worse than 2005, but I have never seen something horrible like the 2019 flood. This is Mahapur (megaflood)," adds Dhulappa.



*A house in Alas village which was destroyed by the flood*

In 1989, Dhulappa who was just 15 years old, was assisting his grandfather and father in a rescue operation by rowing. So far, he has saved more than 10,000 people.

The Zilla Parishad had given him this traditional boat two years back. For 12 days, the villagers were outside Alas and had to stay in the relief camps or at their friends' and relatives' place. "For the first time in our lives we didn't celebrate the Independence Day," said the villagers in unison.

Gajanan parked the boat on the Krishna River on the morning of 17 August. “We were all rescuing till that time,” says Dhulappa.

## **Harnessing the power of interview and documentation**

For Narayan Gaikwad, his pen and a diary remain the strongest weapons. “I am a part-time farmer and a full-time social worker,” he says proudly. Trying to come off as modest, but the 72-year-old Narayan has been working close to 16 hours every day from 5 August, after the flood started ravaging the villages.

He has been travelling the flood-affected villages in Shirol taluka of Kolhapur district. When I met him in the Bastawad village of Shirol taluka, he said, “Today I woke up at 4 am and finished all the farming work by 9 am so that I could meet more flood-affected families.”

He is talking to the people of villages in Shirol taluka which remained the worst affected in the August Kolhapur flood. Narayan notes down the names of the people he has spoken to and the losses they incurred in the flood. When I ask him why he is doing that, he says, “We will make sure that everyone receives the compensation. In case they don’t receive the help, we will protest at the Panchayat Samiti office.”



*72-year-old Narayan Gaikwad talking to a village in Bastawad village noting down the damage caused to the house and cattle*

Narayan has spoken to more than 500 families from around 20 villages in the Shirol taluka in a span of 20 days. He says, “It’s all devastated. We’ll have to start all over again.” While every family he spoke

to was in tears, Narayan decided to inspire people. He kept telling them, “We will fight this together. We are all in this together.”

He is actively working to get the agricultural labourers enrolled under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. For this, he collected the NREGA forms from the Panchayat Samiti office at Shirol and distributed it in the affected villages. “Till the time the fields are restored, people can at least earn some money from this,” he said. He kept informing people about welfare schemes and how older people can get enrolled for the pension scheme.

A resident of the Jambhali village in Kolhapur’s Shirol taluka, Narayan’s two acres field wasn’t affected by the flood. He distributed the vegetables from his field to the flood-affected villagers. “People should unionise and teach the Government a lesson. No help is reaching the villagers,” he said furiously. He has been actively working with All India Kisan Sabha where he visits the villages and talks to farmers, agricultural labourers, and people from the marginalised sections and helps them solve their problems.

Narayan’s observations don’t just restrict to the structures being destroyed. He talks about casteism and patriarchy and how inequality has affected the villages much more. “The other day I was in Arjunwad village where Dalits weren’t given the fodder for the animals. What kind of external help is this?” he says fiercely.

He asks the agricultural labourers how much they are paid every day and notes it. “People have to wait in such a long queue to get the announced Rs 5,000. If they wait in the queue for a day, who will clean the homes? How will they get back to life?” he asks.

In 2005 floods, Narayan had visited several families and ensured they recover from the disaster. “People thought that the water won’t reach more than the 2005 flood level, but they were wrong. Nature has taught us a powerful lesson,” he says.



*Ashok Mallewadi, a tenant farmer from Arjunwad village, whose house was ravaged by the August flood*

Narayan, who has been experimenting with organic farming is livid about the rampant increase in the sugarcane cultivation across the district. “If every farmer is going to produce sugarcane forever, how will the soil and land survive? Nature destroyed the entire sugarcane this year,” he says.

He mentions that just noting down the names won’t help. So he asked his farmer and labourer friends to collect clothes in their villages. Later they distributed the clothes in the villages of Kurundawad and Kavathesar. “We have to reach the *pidit* (marginalised) sections of the society and so I am travelling every home and helping people,” he says.

He believes that it’s not just the natural disaster which has affected the people. Several conservative odds have made it much more difficult for the women to battle this crisis. “Several men are still drunk and the entire burden of cleaning homes, utensils have fallen on the women,” he says.

## **Speaking truth to power**

Akkatai Teli believes in the power of accountability. She brutally questioned Chandrakant Patil, the Maharashtra Cabinet Minister for Revenue and Public Works, when he was on his tour of the flood-affected villages of Shirol taluka on 11 August. “*Election la kiti seats nivdun yenar yacha niyojan hota, pan panyacha niyojan kasa navhata?*” (You had a plan for how many seats your party was going to win in the elections. How did you not have a plan for the flood?)

Chandrakant had no answer to Akkatai's question. Immediately, the party members started threatening her, but she had decided to speak for the people and didn't stop. "Why have you come here now? To ask for votes?" she said fiercely.

66-year-old Akkatai's 1.75 acres had partially drowned in the flood. She shifted to a relative's place in the same village of Shirol. A relief camp with around 3,000 people was arranged at a school and junior college in Shirol. Every day, she would talk to the women and children and ensure they get all the required resources. An unlettered farmer, Akkatai, would contact the local NGOs and individuals and raise the resources immediately for the flood-affected villagers. She arranged food and clothes for at least 1,000 women. The biggest challenge which remained for her was arranging food for the cattle. "Look at them. They will all die if they don't get food soon, and this will be a big loss for all the farmers," she said.



*Akkatai Teli was the only one who fearlessly questioned Chandrakant Patil for the lack of relief and preparedness by the Government*

People from the villages of Ghalwad, Kanwad, Kutwad, Shirati, Hasur, Arjunwad, and Kurundawad had come to this relief camp. For the past two decades, Akkatai has been actively working for Akhil Bharatiya Janwadi Mahila Sanghatana. Through her work, she fights for women's rights.

"A lot of people were scared when I questioned Chandrakant Patil. They even asked me to stop, but I didn't listen to them. As citizens, we should ask our politicians questions," she says. She was cynical of the Government's announcements which had not happened by 11 August.

“The Government doesn’t care for the people. We will fight this disaster and soon start our farming also,” she says confidently. She assisted Narayan Gaikwad and visited 10 villages where she spoke to the women about how the floods had affected them and helped them.

As per the India Meteorological Department, it **rained** 2,389.5 mm rainfall in Kolhapur between 1 June and 28 August 2019 which is 58 percent more than the normal average rainfall for the same period. Whereas Sangli received 509.3 mm rainfall in the same period.

## **Travelling 250 kilometres to connect with the roots**

It was an unusual sight in the Shirati village. Villagers don’t recall seeing destruction at such a rampant scale before. Fallen homes, broken electricity wires, stranded villagers saving themselves from the snakes, sick cattle waiting for fodder, a pool of NDRF personnel rescuing people, doctors helping the patients. To encapsulate the entire frame — a struggle for survival.

The soyabean, *bhuimug* (groundnut), and the sugarcane agriculture fields had disappeared in the village. Tractors and trucks had drowned in water. The unanticipated increase in the water level manifested into a bigger crisis. Shirati’s access had completely been cut off from the other villages within three days of flooding. The majority of the village submerged, leaving the parts at a slightly higher altitude safe. On the same belt are Kutwad, Kanwad, and Hasur villages which were all completely drowned.

However, around 500 farmers stayed back to take care of the cattle. I went to the Shirati village on 11 August with the NDRF personnel where I met Santosh Ombase, 23, and Rohit Damodar, 19. Santosh and Rohit were amongst the team of 12 cab drivers who drove all the way from Pune to the villages in Sangli and Kolhapur districts. Santosh says, “We are all from villages and we know how difficult it gets once your entire life is affected by the flood.”



*Rohit Damodar and Santosh Ombase were among the team of 12 drivers who travelled 250 km from Pune to help the flood affected villagers in Kolhapur and Sangli districts*

Santosh is from Dhakani village in Man taluka of Satara district and Rohit from Loni Gurav village in Khamgaon taluka of Maharashtra’s Buldana district.

Collectively the 12 cab drivers saved Rs 88,000 and brought biscuits, medicines, clothes, sanitary pads, soaps, drinking water, and many other things for the flood-affected villagers. “This money is for the people, for our brothers and sisters,” said Santosh. “While we were driving on the Pune-Bangalore National Highway, we saw several truck drivers stranded. We even offered them food,” said Rohit.

They had not just come to distribute the relief aid, but also in assisting the NDRF personnel in the rescue operation. “We’ve come here to help the villagers. We all stay in Pune city, but we can never forget our rural roots,” says Santosh proudly. To reach out to maximum villagers, they had decided to split in different villages. Almost after spending a week in the flood-affected villages, they returned to Pune. “We didn’t think about losing a week’s work,” says Santosh. After the fellow drivers in Pune got to know of their work, they thanked them for thinking about the people.

When Santosh was leaving for Pune, he said he would first go to rural Pune to collect the fodder from the fields. “There’s no fodder here and we decided to bring it and help the farmers.” While he was collecting the fodder, the farmer decided to donate the fodder cultivated on 1 *guntha* land (0.024 acres), he told me on phone. “My cousin brother distributed it in the villages of Kolhapur and Sangli,” he said.



*Several villagers also assisted the NDRF personnel in the rescue operation*

In a week, they managed to visit nine villages in both Sangli and Kolhapur districts. Santosh and Rohit were angry about the goods hoarding done by the influential people in the villages. “When we went for the rescue operation in the nearby village, the sarpanch had warned us to deliver all the relief aid only at his place. “These things stop many people from helping others,” they say.

## A wireman and fellow villagers save almost 1,000 people

Deepak Suryavanshi shows the only trunk left behind in his house to describe the August flood. “We kept it at an elevation (8 feet). Still, the sarees inside it got wet,” he says. Deepak, 38, is a resident of the Juni Dhamani village in the Miraj taluka of Maharashtra’s Sangli district which started to flood on 5 August. Crossing the 2005 flood water level much faster, the village submerged within three days. Immediately, the villagers decided to launch a rescue operation on 6 August.

Deepak, with four other villagers, collectively saved 750 people from the Juni Dhamani village. A wireman by profession, his own house had collapsed in the flood, but he didn’t pay much attention to it. The bigger task at hand was saving the lives of the people. Not just the Juni Dhamani, they even saved 250 people from the nearby Inam Dhamani village. “None of the NDRF teams could reach our village. Someone had to save them, otherwise many people would have died,” he said.



*Deepak Suryavanshi who helped save around 750 people standing outside his house which had collapsed in the flood*

They used the Gram Panchayat’s mechanical boat in the rescue operation, which lasted for three days. “Every day we would make at least seven trips (covering a distance of 21 km in total), and each trip took us at least 1.5 hours,” he remembers. Others who helped him were Vinayak Chougule, 30, Babaso Patil, 50, Vaibhav Koli, 20, and Annappa Chougule, 50. “Fortunately, none of the villagers died because of the flood,” says Deepak proudly.

“In the start, we used to carry at least 20 people on the boat. After hearing about the Bramhanal boat incident, we were scared, so we started rescuing 15 people at a time,” recalls Deepak. As per

the *Press Trust of India* report, on 8 August, at least 17 people died after a boat capsized near Bramhanal village in Palus taluka of Sangli district in Maharashtra. This incident had scared several flood-affected villagers. Battling the fear of death and drowning, the villagers succeeded in saving every life. The rescued villagers were shifted to relief camps and schools in the nearby villages. Sangli district was flooded by the overflowing of Warna, Krishna, and Panchganaga rivers.

As per Deepak Mhaisekar, Divisional Commissioner, Pune, quoted in a *PTI report*, 56 people have died in Western Maharashtra because of the flood and two persons were reported missing. The report also states that 87,939 families from 104 villages were directly affected in the Sangli district.

Forthwith, [another major crisis](#) which hit the villages was inequality and patriarchy. Several women were forced to restore the houses, wash the utensils, and clothes with the dirty sewer water.



*Most of the houses in the Shirati village of Shirol taluka had drowned in water*

“The Government announced Rs 10,000 per rural family. How can we start our lives with just Rs 10,000?” asks Vijay Suryavanshi, a clerk at the Juni Dhamani Gram Panchayat. The villagers say that they received Rs 5,000 in cash, but the other 5,000 which was supposed to be transferred via bank wasn’t done yet.

While the cities had seen a swift cleaning operation, the villagers complained of the lack of support. In the Kurundawad village of Shirol taluka, the municipality had failed to clear the garbage even after a week of the floods. In the Shikalgarvasat of the village, the residents had no other option than burning the waste. “What can we do? No one is picking up the waste. The smell can spread several diseases. How do we live here with this?” says one of the community members as he sets a few dirty clothes on fire.