

Living on the Edge

Ayub Shikalgar, a swashbuckling first responder and among the last of India's denotified tribal knife sharpeners, is negotiating change in both his lines of work. **Ranjita Ganesan** tells his story

BABLU HAD JUST SAT DOWN to eat—his dust-dredged work clothes plunged in a Dettol bath, mud-caked shoes scrubbed and left out to dry, arms and legs treated with soap and warm water, the scratches tintured—when he broke down. “Rizwana, the boy’s eyes were so badly swollen. He must have been in a lot of pain.”

It was 2013 and he had been on duty the previous day at the site of a disaster in the impoverished suburban sprawl of Mumbra, outside Mumbai, where a four-month-old building had abruptly slumped, crushing the lives being led on its seven bustling floors. Bablu had removed a concrete column manually using a heavy hammer, because industrial excavators might have worsened the damage, saving one trapped individual. He had also urgently dug for 15 minutes in airless darkness to make his way towards the cries of a child of eight or nine, about as old as his own Razaq, who was lodged in the collapsed second floor with his face tilted skywards, doused intermittently by falling dirt. When he freed the weeping child and handed him to the fire police waiting above, he saw that uplifting scene which keeps taking him back to the distressing business of rescue work: people who are extricated after many hours, sometimes whole days, of being trapped, blinking at the world in disbelief, stung by the light outside.

“Kya hisaab se dekh raha hai usko hi maloom (Who knows what goes on in their head at that moment),” he says in Dakhani-inflected Hindustani. The Civil Defence force he was serving at the time was disbanded in Maharashtra five years ago. But Ayub ‘Bablu’ Shikalgar continues to be a first responder at cave-ins, floods, highway accidents and fires across Thane and the rest of the state. In emergency response circles, this



Photographs: Rajesh Prabhakar

weather-beaten man of formidable build is affectionately called ‘chuha’ (rat). Few have the nerve to burrow into the deep, narrow spaces he dares to visit. He has other nicknames too. Growing up in the 1980s, he became his parents’ Bablu because every home had a ‘Bablu’. To his young family, he is the ‘Bahubali’ who once pacified and dragged a burning

cylinder out of their flat and carried a doctor on his shoulders for more than two kilometres through floodwaters.

Embedded deep in calamitous zones, where it is either pitch black or too risky for cameras to be allowed, the 45-year-old has never been glimpsed in news coverage. The stardom usually accrues to the officers

stationed aboveground to receive the survivors. What motivates a civilian, with no duty to serve, to throw himself repeatedly into danger? It is not fame. “Kisiki mayyat mein main credit loon, achcha nahin lagta (I can’t look for recognition in someone else’s tragedy). We save some lives but many people die.” There is no great monetary reward

Ayuk Shikalgar aka Bablu on a rescue mission at a building collapse in Bhiwandi, Thane, 2020



Bablu at his traditional knife shop in Mulund, Mumbai

attached either. As a volunteer for a defunct force, he actually spends his own money to travel and save people. “Neki kar, dariya mein daal,” he philosophises. Perform good deeds without any expectation. Thousands have likely received help from him, though he has stopped counting.

Courage is hard to define or understand, it flummoxed even Plato, and Bablu doesn’t help demystify it. The constituents of his particular physical bravery are easier to identify. Simply put, he enjoys hard labour. His heroism is rare so it makes him feel special. A natural capacity for empathy is revealed in stray comments such as the lament that a lot of our “jaanawar bhai-behen” (animal brothers and sisters) were swept away in 2021’s Chiplun deluge. Above everything else, two things make

him feel called upon to do such work: ancestral wisdom mixed with modern nerdery.

We need a bottom-up version of history, not a top-down one, Bablu suggests, between sips of tea on a narrow street crowded with electrical and metalworks units. When he is not involved in relief operations, the rescuer sits at his knife shop here, in the north-east Mumbai locality of Mulund. A true hole in the wall and a vestige of the past, it is packed with a ragtag assortment of blades, wooden handles, and an imposing presence—the saan. Bablu is a descendant of the Shikalgars, or ‘tool shapers’, the only clan of its kind to sharpen blades with this large wheel made from powdered stone and lac. The saan spins so fast, one ill-judged move can inflict serious

injuries. It deteriorates and breaks every few years, sometimes maiming the person sitting at it. Cooks, tailors, farmers, butchers and gardeners of a certain vintage still like getting their knives and scissors custom-made this way.

“Instead of rajas and maharajas, teach us about lohars and sutars,” he continues. Bablu would like his children’s schools to explain how those who laboured actually built kingdoms. Could wars have been won without the cobbler, the carpenter, and indeed, the tool shaper? Bablu’s education stopped at Class 10, with him choosing the art of knife making, while his sisters married and brother opted for a career in computer science. Desk work, formal clothes and fixed hours are too stuffy for his taste. The day we meet, he is comfortably attired in t-shirt and shorts, with a band around the neck, ready to be transformed into a mask when needed.

Bablu is among the last of his generation to practise the ancestral trade. Growing up around the occupation, given as it is to accidents, danger is a familiar affair. From the age of 12, when he began assisting in his father’s implements business, he also amassed a practical understanding of metallurgy. This knowledge of how metals tend to behave and how one can make them co-operate applies just as usefully while cutting through disaster wreckage as it does in his workshop. The steel favda (spade) or parai

(chisel) are great for light work. Large electric tools and hammers can set off vibrations. For digging through debris in constricted spaces, he relies on his hands and a ‘tommy bar’, a 17- or 18-inch rod with sharpened ends, which he fashioned mainly out of carbon steel. It is

easier to wield and works with a prying action, cutting out the metres one would need to, say, draw back and strike a hammer.

The tommy bar has a reputation, though. It is also a favourite for breaking locks. Shaping or carrying one attracts police suspicion. Twice, Bablu was questioned to check if he had made one for local lawbreakers. Both times, with no proof of his involvement, the police let him go with cold warnings, he says. Such questioning is regularly aimed at tool-making Shikalgars, based on the mythology created by the racial British-era ‘Criminal Tribes Act’, which classified a number of tribes as ‘criminal’—identifying ‘crime’ as the caste, profession and religion of those communities. The act was revoked and communities denotified in free India in 1952 but, nearly seventy years later, the stigma persists. Colonial books such as Michael Kennedy’s *The Criminal Classes in India* (1908) continue to influence police training, observes sociologist Milind Bokil.

The Shikalgars’ is among those neglected histories Bablu alludes to. The group has rarely been studied in depth, even by those who have researched denotified and

Ayub ‘Bablu’ Shikalgar continues to be a first responder at cave-ins, floods, highway accidents and fires. In emergency response circles, this weather-beaten man of formidable build is affectionately called ‘chuha’ (rat). Few have the nerve to burrow into the deep, narrow spaces he dares to visit

nomadic tribes (DNTs). Bokil shares the prevailing origin theory in scholarship: ‘Shikalgar’ developed as a name for those who adopted Sikhism in Maharashtra. Sikhism containing elements of Hindu and Muslim ideologies and practices, he notes that Hindus and Muslims emerged among Shikalgars too. They prepared and ground metal weapons for kings and, when kingdoms fell, they were displaced and took to a nomadic search for work. If knife-makers engaged in crimes, it was usually at the behest of upper castes such as money lenders and goldsmiths. “Although they were involved in these crimes, they were not the beneficiaries of these crimes,” the sociologist explains. They were induced to use their weapons for dacoity and bring back the spoils for laundering, only a small part of which they were finally given. As such, they remained poor.

The understanding among Muslim Shikalgars about their genesis varies—they believe their elders came from Saudi Arabia. ‘Saikal’ means ‘polish’ in Arabic, so those who burnished a shiny knife’s edge came to be called ‘Saikalgars’. Muslim, Hindu and Sikh Shikalgars are rooted in states including Karnataka, Gujarat and Punjab. They opened the first knife-grinding shops in Mumbai in the mid-1950s, and unofficial estimates hold between 70,000 and 75,000 Shikalgars live in Maharashtra today. Besides tools, some members of the community, in Sangli’s Sattar gully, are known for making sitars.

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Though Shikalgars were included in the Denotified (Vimukta Jatis) and Nomadic Tribes (VJNT) declared by Maharashtra in 1961, Muslim Shikalgars, less literate at the time, only learnt about it in 1980. Naushad Yakub Shikalgar, who currently heads the Shikalgar Jamaat Trust, says the government had rejected Muslims as beneficiaries. Naushad’s father was among those who successfully challenged and turned things around by 1995, saying access to those rights should be based on occupation, rather than caste or religion.

Currently counted among the Nomadic Tribes-B category, the community is beginning to rise from the bottom. Shikalgars are now to be found in modern enterprises, in medicine, and as members of the police and administrative services. Women, who tended to be subjugated in the past, are given community funds to run small businesses. Bablu’s wife Rizwana opened an artificial jewellery shop, for instance, and holds the fort when he is away on call. His 12-year-old daughter Sania wants to get into social work, and his son, now 17, is trying to join the Navy.

My marriage was arranged because of his uniform and salary,” Rizwana says cheerfully, in their one-bedroom flat in a Bhandup redevelopment. The Civil Defence wage, a mere Rs 30-90 per day, and uniform—which would be decorated with two stars on the epaulettes



Picking up the pieces after a building crashed in Mahad, Raigad, 2020

years later when Bablu turned ‘staff officer’—had to be forfeited in 2016. Training stopped. The scope of the force, which had around one lakh trained and willing volunteers, shrank without explanation. The Directorate of Civil Defence became the department where Maharashtra cops go to retire. Instituted in 1968, Civil Defence is supposed to equip locals to act in the first crucial minutes of rescue and relief operations, before elite squads arrive. When Bablu signed up at the age of 21 in 1997, training was available to interested civilians over 18. It covered how to fight fires, check the current rate of flowing water with a scrap of paper or blade of grass before water rescues, use a walkie-talkie, perform a structure audit to safeguard oneself before rescuing others. What Bablu has left to show for his efforts is

a crinkled plastic bag full of certificates in Marathi, Hindi and English.

But the pull of field work is not easily forgotten. He joined a crew of former Civil Defence specialists—drone pilots, rafters, ham radio operators and scouts—who remain operative, despite no official mandate. Because of their observable expertise, they work alongside the fire police, the National Disaster Response Force and the Thane Disaster Response Force. At a building crash in Bhiwandi, where official squads of 40 dislodged one casualty, five civilian rescuers took out as many as seven. They were also able to transport nine ventilator patients by boat from a water-logged, blacked-out Fortis Hospital in Kalyan to open roads two kilometres away. Eight survived. “What



Bablu wields the trusty 'tommy' in his Bhandup, Mumbai flat

one knowledgeable person can do, a crowd cannot," says Bimal Nathwani, former divisional warden of the Civil Defence for Kalyan-Dombivali, who heads the team of still-active veterans. A disaster management geek, having studied that science in Mumbai, Bangalore and Germany, he is at a Thane fire station one Thursday, voluntarily teaching local fighters to use an outboard motor (OBM)—for free. The officers present confirm that this is the first time they are seeing a live demonstration of the motor, an asset in water rescues.

Letters from Nathwani and his group to the prime minister, the state's chief minister, the state and union home ministers, and the president seeking a Civil Defence revival in Maharashtra have been met with silence. But after a nudge from the High Court of Bombay in August 2021, the state government is under pressure to launch Civil Defence units in calamity-prone Sindhudurg and Ratnagiri

districts. Whispers in law enforcement say a resurrection has an in-principle nod and, if it goes ahead, volunteering programmes and units could open in every district.

Not 30 minutes after any disaster hits, the civilian rescuers' phones light up with WhatsApp alerts and everyone must reply "Ready". Nathwani always tells Bablu he will be picked up even if he doesn't reply. On cue, the latter's family begin packing a change of clothes, clean socks and tools for him: one yellow hard hat, a fluorescent safety vest, a pocket line, a double pocket line, safety belt and the trusty tommy. Rizwana suppresses anxiety by reasoning, "If he has a gift, why should I stop him from using it?" Bablu is selfless and dedicated on field, vouches Nathwani, who won a President's Home Guard and Civil Defence medal in 2015. "Actually, he should have won a President's medal too." Few people have that sort of 'daring' in them. "The only drawback is he is hard to control. He doesn't always know the right way to talk or listen."

What makes Bablu lose his cool? "I give other rescuers 15-30 minutes to try their way but if it doesn't work, I have to say something. There are lives at stake." To speak to Bablu is to be reminded of the man-made and natural ailments that have become chronic in Mumbai and its surrounding regions. Heedless urbanisation, illegal constructions and slow repairs mean structures routinely sink like cakes in too-hot ovens. In 2019, Mumbai fire brigade data showed that it receives one call a day about a building or its parts having collapsed in the world's second most densely populated city. As the Arabian Sea warms up, flood-causing cyclones have been hissing at the western coast of India more frequently than before.

As a first responder, Bablu has a view of the human condition at its most naked. A sweaty, piss-stained, bloody, wet-with-tears version of suffering. The only things one can control, he reckons, are neeyat (intentions), dua (prayer) and ummeed (hope). Trapped children can be motivated to hold on by dangling simple promises of water, chocolate, ice cream. But adult survivors often lose any desire to pick up the pieces of their lives because: "Jab aashiyana nahin hai, toh ghar ka cheez jama karke kya karega?" (When there is no residence left, what will I do with objects?) "How is it fair for people to suffer so violently in their own home?" he wonders.

Bablu is haunted by thoughts of those who don't make it. A woman who was saved and hospitalised wanted to thank him but he didn't visit her and she died 11 days later. A 150-kg man, freed after 15 hours of being stuck, died on the way to the hospital. He deliberately never keeps in touch with rescued individuals. "I don't want to be anyone's godfather." The capacity for resilience among victims amazes him, though. The way they sit in the same position, waiting for help. "Most people get restless if the electricity is out for 30 minutes. I think we should all sit still in a dark place, and know what that feels like. Rescue specialists, especially."

His own life has been feeling a bit stagnant lately. His two lines of work are both rewarding yet monetarily almost punitive. At Rs 40 for sharpening a knife, he makes about

Rs 300 on a good day. During the pandemic, customers began asking for discounts. Glamorous stainless blades have taken over, eating into the demand for his iron knives, which although built to last tend to look old even when new. An attempt by Shikalgars to market traditional tools online has failed because

garments, agriculture and leather industries are all switching to cutting by machine. By nightfall, the street where Bablu's shop stands turns into a haunt for drunks—'bevda galli'. In his soot-covered knife-making clothes, the daily wager is convinced people mistake him for a beggar. The value of artistry, of plain handmade things, has fallen. Bablu's father, who for long ran an implements business in the city, shut shop and moved back to their native village, Lengre, in Sangli.

With Civil Defence, which involves collaboration with law enforcement forces, Bablu may have tacitly subverted some of the stigma they aimed at his ancestral trade. Civilian defenders should have been an essential service in the state during the lockdown, he says; they could have helped ferry medicines and patients. If that line does pick up again, he could

find purpose in training future volunteers. Otherwise, rescues are beginning to look like an unsustainable passion. He finds himself facing a barrier: Should he wait for things to improve or pack up and move to the village too? Once again, this time reluctantly, he must dig deep to find the light. ■

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