

Operation Silkyara

Operation Silkyara

The Untold Story of One of India's
Greatest Rescue Missions

Saurabh Sharma

 juggernaut

JUGGERNAUT BOOKS
C-I-128, First Floor, Sangam Vihar, Near Holi Chowk,
New Delhi 110080, India

First published by Juggernaut Books 2026

Copyright © Saurabh Sharma 2026

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

P-ISBN: 9789353459109

E-ISBN: 9789353454944

The views and opinions expressed in this book are the author's own.
The facts contained herein were reported to be true as on the date
of publication by the author to the publishers of the book, and the
publishers are not in any way liable for their accuracy or veracity.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
transmitted or stored in a retrieval system in any form or by any
means without the written permission of the publisher.

For sale in the Indian Subcontinent only

Typeset in Adobe Caslon Pro by R. Ajith Kumar, Noida

Printed at Thomson Press India Ltd

*For Divya Tripathi, my wife – my home,
in every sense of the word.*

*For Surekha Sharma, my mother, and Rama Kant
Sharma, my father – my first story and my strength.*

For the friends who showed up, and kept showing up.

*And for Bablu, my dog – the one who asked for nothing
and gave everything. You left last month, quietly,
leaving me and my grief behind. But grief is just love
with nowhere to go, so I place it here to keep it forever.*

*

*A journalist spends his life telling other people's stories.
This page, at last, belongs to mine.*

Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	ix
1. The Signal	1
2. The Hercules Gamble	29
3. Word Reaches Home	53
4. Life in the Tunnel	79
5. Setbacks	105
6. The First Breakthrough	133
7. The Headquarters	159
8. Calling the Miners	183
9. At the End of the Tunnel	205
<i>Epilogue</i>	231
<i>Afterword</i>	235
<i>Sources</i>	249
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	251
<i>A Note on the Author</i>	255

Introduction

In the early morning of 12 November 2023, there was a loud thud in the tunnel that was being constructed to connect Silkyara to Barkot. The thud was so loud that everyone inside the tunnel thought the mountain was coming down and the tunnel was collapsing. The shift was about to change, and the night workers were preparing to wrap up for the morning workers to take over. Several had already debriefed with their supervisors, while the rest were waiting for their fellow workers to finish up and walk out of the tunnel. Little did they know they would not see the sunlight anytime soon.

Gabbar Singh Negi, one of the senior workers inside the tunnel, realized that something had gone wrong; he had faced a similar situation before. Even as he tried to understand what was happening in the commotion, he

Introduction

saw panicked workers running southwards through the tunnel towards the Barkot end instead of the entrance.

Some workers told Gabbar that an earthquake had struck, some believed the mountain was collapsing and some had seen exactly what had happened.

‘The tunnel’s entrance has collapsed.’

Gabbar couldn’t believe it.

‘The entire mountain has come down, and the resulting debris is blocking the entrance,’ another explained.

‘But that’s not possible. The work at the entrance has already been completed. Maybe the collapse is somewhere near the water pipes, or where we are yet to complete the final lining of the tunnel,’ Gabbar said.

Confused about what had happened, all workers decided to gather at one place and start heading towards the entrance. After walking about 70 metres through the tunnel, lit by pale yellow bulbs and halogen lights at intervals, they saw a pitch-black wall of debris; not a single ray of light could pass through it. The unlucky workers were now trapped inside.

Seeing the blocked entrance with their own eyes terrified the workers. The solid black wall of debris looked like the mouth of hell. Vikram, the youngest among them, started crying inconsolably.

Introduction

Sabah Ahmad, the foreman working under Gabbar, realized the gravity of the situation and tried to console Vikram.

‘We will all get to go home,’ he said. ‘Gabbarji, I and a few others here have faced a similar situation a couple of times, so trust me. We will be out soon, in time to celebrate Chhath and Diwali together.’

Meanwhile, I was at my home in Lucknow, busy with Diwali shopping, talking to friends on the phone and sorting out arrangements for the post-Diwali celebration – food, drinks and the venue. I was a freelance reporter working for various national and international publications back then. Burnt out, I had told one of my friends that I wanted to take a break and would resume pitching story ideas after Diwali. Little did I know what was coming.

The next morning, I received a WhatsApp notification from a government source saying that 40 people were trapped in a tunnel and were likely to be rescued within a couple of days. I thought about it for a bit, then ignored it for about an hour and a half, convinced that publishers would not be interested.

Introduction

Eventually, I flagged it to a few publishers I knew. The news was initially ignored – likely because it was Diwali.

I was in a carefree mood and was preparing for the festivities. I was about to take my wife shopping when I received a call from one of the leading publishers, asking me if I was up for the assignment and ready to go to the site. I said yes, much to my wife's disappointment. I packed a bag quickly for a two-day visit, taking hardly any winterwear, and left for the airport within two hours of getting the go-ahead.

I reached the tunnel site the next day around 2.30 p.m., shortly before the sun began to set, and found myself to be the first reporter on the ground. The entrance to the tunnel had not been barricaded yet, and I could move around the area freely until evening. I struggled to find accommodation and ended up renting a small room in a local resident's home about 4 kilometres from the site.

The very next morning, barricades went up and restrictions were imposed. I sensed that the rescue was not going to be an easy one, and decided to stay until it was completed.

1

The Signal

12 November 2023

Delhi-Jaipur Highway

Colonel Deepak Patil, wearing a black helmet, was riding his Royal Enfield, smiling at the thought of finally being able to spend time with his son, daughter and wife in Jaipur.

Patil was enjoying the bike ride like the last peg of a single-malt Scotch whisky, not knowing that its effect would not last long. All he was thinking of was wearing a kurta-pyjama, cooking food and bursting crackers on Diwali night – which happened to be that day.

It was about 9.15 a.m. when his phone started buzzing with calls. He ignored the vibrations at first, thinking they were coming from the motorcycle, but

Operation Silkyara

after about five minutes, he pulled over to check his phone.

To his surprise, he saw over nine missed calls from different numbers, a couple of them from his superiors in the Indian Army. Before he could call back, his phone rang again.

'Jai Hind, Saab,' said Patil, and then his mouth fell open as the details of the conversation sank in.

He was informed by the senior officer he was speaking to that the tunnel he had been posted at in Silkyara, from where he had just returned, had partially collapsed. He was ordered to go to the site, as he was the only officer in the army who knew the under-construction tunnel inside out. He was to go to Jaipur first and make arrangements to get to the tunnel at the earliest. After being filled in on the details, Patil agreed to help in the rescue mission.

The Silkyara tunnel was being built by the National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited (NHIDCL) as part of the Char Dham all-weather road project. It was designed to connect Silkyara to Barkot in the upper Himalayas, reducing the two-hour commute to about 30 minutes.

The Signal

The call had left Patil shaken. He was certain that he had followed all the safety protocols for the tunnel.

He stood there thinking for a couple of minutes, sweating profusely despite the early winter chill – the temperature was around 15 degrees Celsius on the highway. His hands shook as he dialled the engineer at Navayuga Engineering, the company constructing the tunnel. ‘Tell me exactly what happened,’ he demanded.

As he was given the rundown of the situation, he pulled out a small pocket diary and started jotting down the details. While still on the call, another number kept flashing on his screen. Irritated, he asked the engineer to hold and answered the unknown call.

It turned out to be one of his juniors deployed at the tunnel.

Patil told him that he had received an order from the head office and was preparing to come and help with the rescue mission, which was apparently soon going to be launched by the Uttarakhand State Disaster Response Force. To his surprise, the junior officer told him that the local police had already been informed about the incident within about 40 minutes of the collapse, and that one of the home guards deployed

Operation Silkyara

nearby had also visited the site on a motorcycle and likely informed his seniors.

Patil was at a loss. He squatted on the highway beside his motorcycle, head in his hands, trying to understand what could have gone wrong. The tunnel he had been building until just a few weeks ago had seemed foolproof.

What could it be? From which point did it collapse? Where was the fault? Was it an earthquake? No, no, the tunnel was earthquake-proof, it couldn't have caused this. The questions churned in his mind as his phone continued to ring.

Within minutes, Patil stood up, sat on his motorcycle and started it. He put on his helmet and continued his journey to Jaipur, knowing he had to go and rescue his people who were stuck inside the tunnel.

At this point, all he knew was that the tunnel had collapsed. He had no information on how many people were trapped inside, or whether there were injuries or fatalities.

Silkyara

Four hours later, back at the site, the home guard who had visited earlier returned with a sub-inspector and ordered the bulldozer drivers from the morning shift to be called in.

‘I have seen many landslides in the mountains. I will clear this debris within an hour and bring everyone out,’ the home guard said, climbing onto the bulldozer along with the driver Amit. They both invoked Baba Bokh Nag, the local deity, and drove into the tunnel.

They reached the site of collapse, about 200 metres from the mouth of the tunnel. It was lit by halogen lights and dim tube lights, and crowded with workers trying to figure out what had happened and how they could get their coworkers out. Right outside the tunnel were two JCBs, a tractor and a couple of cement mixers. Some workers had climbed onto the mixers, trying to find a cavity in the debris through which they might be able to communicate with those trapped inside. Others kept calling the trapped workers on their mobile phones. Nothing worked.

Operation Silkyara

Outside, a crowd of about 40 people, including locals, had gathered. As soon as they heard the bulldozer roaring from inside the darkness of the tunnel, they began invoking Baba Bokh Nag, their chants growing louder.

Then one man began shouting, declaring that this was the curse of Baba Bokh Nag, as the government had failed to heed the warnings.

‘They did not believe in our deity, they showed no respect and ignored all the warning signs. Here comes the apocalypse, and this is just the beginning,’ he said. Then he began to dance wildly, as if possessed. ‘You did not build a temple in my honour, and now I demand that you begin your prayers and build one here immediately, or you will lose all your people in that tunnel and it will never open.’

Watching all this, Bhupendra Nagar, who ran a makeshift tea stall barely 40 metres north of the tunnel gate on the Silkyara end, began telling a local legend. ‘Long ago,’ he said, ‘a family whose son was to be married had failed to sacrifice an animal in honour of Baba Bokh Nag, and the entire wedding procession had disappeared.’