

THE
**POLESTAR
AWARDS**



**25th
ANNUAL
POLESTAR
AWARDS**

WINNERS DOSSIER

CELEBRATING EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

The PoleStar Awards stand as a tribute to the highest standards of Indian journalism - honouring professionals whose work informs, questions, inspires, and strengthens the fabric of society. These awards recognise outstanding talent across the media landscape and celebrate journalists who serve as catalysts in bringing credible, meaningful, and impactful information to the public domain.

More than a recognition platform, the PoleStar Awards represent a belief: that journalism, when practiced with integrity and courage, shapes public consciousness and drives progress. The awards salute media citizens who uphold truth, amplify voices that matter, and translate complex realities into stories that enlighten the nation.

Conceptualised by the Polestar Foundation in 1998, the awards were instituted to spotlight excellence in IT and Business Journalism at a time when India was stepping into a new era of economic and technological transformation. Over the years, as journalism evolved and society's needs expanded, the awards also broadened their vision. Since 2017, the PoleStar Awards proudly celebrate the power of Good News Features - recognising stories that restore faith, highlight positive change, and remind us of humanity's capacity for resilience and innovation.

Today, the PoleStar Awards are not merely an annual ceremony they are a continuing commitment to responsible journalism, ethical storytelling, and the enduring power of truth.

BEST GOOD NEWS FEATURE



BHAVYA DORE

Bhavya Dore won the Polestar Award for Best Feature in Good News for her article **'Buried Beneath a Mountain'**, which appeared in Reader's Digest India, in June 2024.

Bhavya Dore is a freelance journalist. Her work has appeared in the BBC, The Guardian, Undark, Caravan, Narratively and other national and international publications. Dore received a degree in English Literature and two master's degrees in Sociology and Developmental Studies before pursuing a career in journalism, beginning her work at a national newspaper in Mumbai and then moving to freelance reporting. Her previous coverage has focused on juvenile crime, the legal system and education. She is also managing editor on the legal history podcast, Friend of the Court.

In December 2023, shortly after the Uttarakhand tunnel rescue, an editor from Reader's Digest invited Bhavya to write a deeply reported feature on the human spirit behind the mission. Bhavya immediately stepped up to the task. The brief was clear: to focus on the resilience and human spirit of everyone involved and to create a "cinematic" narrative.

Working remotely, she connected with survivors, rescuers, and families scattered across the country. Through repeated, sensitive phone interviews, she worked to inhabit their memories without re-traumatizing them, respecting those who weren't ready to speak. To build a composite picture of the event, she anchored the story in three perspectives: a trapped worker, a rescuer, and a miner.

Beyond the interviews, Bhavya pored over news footage, press coverage, and government statements to ground the narrative in fact. Her goal was to look beyond the crisis itself, capturing the lives of these individuals and doing justice to everyone involved.

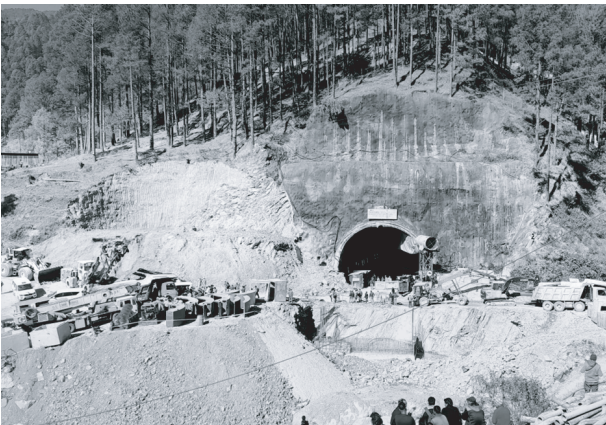
https://www.magzter.com/stories/lifestyle/Readers-Digest-India/BURIED-BENEATH-A-MOUNTAIN?srsIid=AfmBOoqg-rcvFos_q6SV-56K4vbAzirKemRLtmnWmgA5Gn8zCOvS8ip7

Buried Beneath a Mountain

Bhavya Dore won the Polestar Award for Best Feature in Good News for her article 'Buried Beneath a Mountain', which appeared in Reader's Digest India, in June 2024.

Bhavya Dore | Reader's Digest India, June 2024

Buried Beneath a Mountain



Gabar Singh Negi normally spent Diwali with his wife and children at home in the mountainous north. Last November, on Diwali day, the 52-year-old Uttarakhand local looked forward to finishing work early and heading home to celebrate—light lamps through the house, perform a puja and feast with his family.

First, however, he would have to finish his 12-hour night shift as foreman at the worksite of the Silkyara tunnel in Uttarkashi. Work had begun the previous night at 8 p.m., and would end by 8 a.m.. A few of the men had finished their shift early and headed off to enjoy the festivities.

Then, at around 5:30 that morning, an earth-shattering explosion ripped through the air inside the tunnel.

When the chaos subsided, Negi grabbed his wireless handset and asked the operator: "What was that?!"

Some blast, he was told. "But how could it be a blast?" he remembers asking. "We are the ones doing the blasting, and we haven't done any."

Perhaps a short circuit, the man replied. But the newly laid lights inside the tunnel were still on.



Rescuers in the process of laying a 3-foot-wide pipe through the pile of debris

An old hand, Negi had spent more than two decades on the job, and his instincts screamed that something was terribly wrong. He and a few others climbed into his Bolero and began driving towards the mouth of the tunnel to investigate. But when the soft light of dawn that should have come into view never showed, Negi realized with dismay that he was right. The entrance to the tunnel was completely shut. There was no way out.

Signs of Life

It was 12 November 2023 and the 41 men working inside the 4.5-km-long Silkyara–Barkot tunnel in Uttarakhand found themselves suddenly sundered from the world. The two-lane tunnel, meant to connect some of the state's most sacred and popular pilgrimage sites and reduce travel time, had been under construction since 2018. Now a part of the tunnel's roof had suddenly caved in and collapsed.

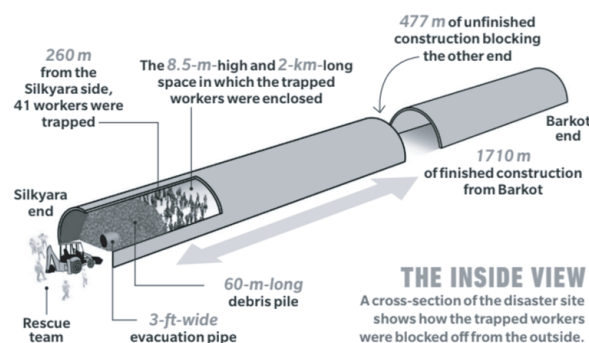
As the oldest, and the leader of the crew, Negi took charge. He sent out a message on the wireless that the other workers scattered through the site should stop what they were doing and assemble towards the front. After they regrouped, he collected as much natural water trickling down the tunnel's walls as possible for temporary succour, even though he feared it might be contaminated. He then foraged the peels of recently eaten peanuts, washed and distributed them amongst the group, comprising men from Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa and elsewhere. It would likely be a while before they got help—it was a holiday after all, and most people were likely celebrating at home. "Happy Diwali," he said wryly, to infuse a bit of cheer as they snacked on the leftovers.

Soon, though, the deafening silence seemed to engulf them. Did anyone know they were still in there? How could they send across a message to indicate they were alive, and that they needed help?

Negi had a mobile phone, but they were 260 meters inside the tunnel and there was no network. They suspected their colleagues were outside, or would come by at some point, but had no idea how to get through to them.

The men tried shouting through the pipelines that ran all the way outside, and then funnelled water through them to signal their presence. But they had no idea which of the pipes had survived the collapse. Luckily though, a four-inch wide compressor pipeline had. That evening, they got a response from their teammates who had gathered outside.

"Don't worry, we are trying to get you out!" Negi recalls hearing. An unsigned note of reassurance also arrived, telling them not to worry, that people were around.



A Race against Time

Meanwhile, the government machinery had whirred to life. Member of the National Disaster Management Authority, Lt Gen. Ata Hasnain (retd) was at home in Delhi when he received the news from the control room that people were stuck inside a tunnel in Uttarakhand. By this time, members of the national and state disaster response teams had already been mobilized by the government.

The situation was grim, but imminent survival was not a major concern. The four-inch compressor pipe became a precious lifeline. Rescuers sent the men small packets of puffed rice, jaggery, water and other dry rations using compressed air to propel the items through to the other end.

But from the outset, there were a host of variables in play: Would the rescue efforts trigger another collapse? Would they be able to reach the men inside in time before their condition grew worse? Hasnain was in charge of handling the coordination between teams and interfacing with the media in Delhi. "The question was how long will it take?" he says. "I always say disaster management is akin to war. In war-like situations, information is at a premium." Hasnain calmly addressed reporters, but always parried questions about a time-frame. The truth was that no one knew.

One thing was clear though: there would have to be several simultaneous plans and agencies in play. "It's what I call an 'all-of-government approach,'" he says. "The government of India did not leave it to one agency to handle."

The first plan of attack was to insert a three-foot-wide pipe through the 60-metre-long blockage, made up of rocks, concrete, iron rods and other debris from the collapse, to get to the workers. Horizontal drilling from the Silkyara side had begun within two days of the incident. Soon, however, the rescuers needed a more advanced machine. This was then brought in from Delhi. Drilling reached roughly one-third of the way when the machine hit an obstacle. A day's delay ensued. The pressure was mounting.

Worried relatives thronged the site. Indrajeet Kumar Verma had rushed down from Rishikesh the day after he heard that his elder brother Viswajeet Kumar, 40, was among the trapped workers. That evening the brothers conducted their first conversation shouted across the pipeline. Viswajeet assured him that the men were uninjured and things on the whole were alright inside. This put Indrajeet at ease.

His brother was well, though out of sight and separated by rubble. Over the days the brothers spoke periodically at least once a day. Verma was certain his brother would be rescued—whether it took two days or a week or a month. “The machines were at work,” he says. “I was there, watching the whole thing with my own eyes.”

Inside, Negi was in charge of keeping spirits high. He was determined to take it one day at a time, eking out morale and survival as long as possible. The men had grown accustomed to the dim, cavernous space—around 2-km long and 8.5-metre high—in which they were enclosed. They couldn't bathe or wash, but they talked, played games and did yoga. They even made a deck of playing cards from the scraps of paper they had.



Tunneling expert Arnold Dix

Outside, the rescuers's progress was promising, but painfully slow, given the challenges of sourcing specialized equipment, the delicate nature of the terrain and the complexity of the operation. The biggest concern, however, was the possibility of the remaining parts of the tunnel collapsing as well. The site was thrumming with anxiety, frustration and frenetic activity, with visits from high-ranking officials, and a scrum of media. The team needed a fresh take on the problem and on 20 November, they got one from an internationally recognized tunnel expert from Australia.

Second Wind

The blades of the helicopter noisily sliced through the thin mountain air as Arnold Dix feasted on the gorgeous Himalayan landscapes unfolding before him. President of the International Tunnelling and Underground Space Association, Dix, 60, came with vast experience in the field including crisis management: from advising on a new airport in Qatar, to fire safety in the UK, and on metro upgrades in Australia.

Dix was in Germany when he first heard of the crisis from an Indian engineer he knew, and over the past week, he had been on consultation calls with experts and officials discussing the Silkyara situation and sharing ideas. But there were no clear answers at first.

“I can't go to a book that says Tunnel Rescue: Silkyara: Chapter 6—Do this. There's no magic formula,” he says. The bearded Australian, with a goofy sense of humour, was in Europe on work. As the days rolled on, it was becoming clearer that just how tricky an operation it would be, given the delicate Himalayan ecology. “So they said, ‘Can you come to us?’ And I said, ‘Yeah sure, I can come.’” After a long and tiring journey from Ljubljana to Uttarkashi, Dix deplaned and first headed to the small local shrine, before joining the rescuers at the tunnel. He knew things were grim—but inexplicably, something in the air spoke to him.

“Normally everyone just gets killed. But for some reason, and I can't really explain why, I just had a good feeling about it. Not a good feeling like ‘it's going to be an easy day’, but more like, if we can just stay focussed and work together as a team, we could do it.” He told the media that they would get the 41 men home before Christmas.

Dix slipped seamlessly into the team. As tunnelling proceeded from the Silkyara side, experts from different departments and ministries were plotting other lines of

attack in the event plan-A of laying a pipe through the 60-metre-thick debris pile failed.

One was to drill down from the top of the mountain to reach the workers. But this approach ran the risk of hitting an aquifer, and accidentally drowning the men. Another was to drill from the opposite end of the tunnel—the side that opened into Barkot. A fourth option was to deploy drift technology, to scrape the sides of the tunnel. Each of these options were in various stages of progress simultaneously.

The Mountain Was Moody. There Was No Guarantee It Would Not Collapse Again.

Nine days after the collapse, rescuers were able to insert a small endoscopic camera through the pipeline. Shakily snaking its way through to the men trapped on the other side, images from inside the tunnel were slowly beamed to the watching world.

“Wipe the camera,” the voice guiding the men instructed. They then picked it up. “Tell us your names one by one,” the voice said again. The men passed the camera amongst themselves, still kitted out in their helmets and fluorescent work jackets. For the first time in a long time, Negi felt seen. The fact that the world had not forgotten felt real, and hope rekindled. A phone exchange was also operational on the site by now, with three medical professionals on call to advise, counsel and offer psychological support to the men.

But it wasn't all good news. Dix and the rescuers could see “how fragile things were on the other side”. He knew they had to take it slow, because the mountain was moody. There was no guarantee it would not collapse again.



Members of the team who were trapped pose for a photo with two of their rescuers, including Munna Qureshi (sixth from the left, in a white and grey shirt)

By 22 November, the auger machine—a 45-tonne corkscrew-like drilling device—had reached 45 metres; just about 15 to 18 metres to go. A breakthrough seemed imminent, and triumph just hours away. But then, the machine spectacularly broke down, its drilling parts lodged in the debris. How would the rescue proceed from here?

An Ace in the Hole

On 22 November, Munna Qureshi was at home when he got a call from a coworker about the disaster. The 33-year-old had spent years working in the dark and dank corners of Delhi laying cables and pipes below the ground. It was a dangerous existence, but the only one he knew.



NDRF personnel celebrate after the trapped workers were safely evacuated

Qureshi's job entailed experience in a high-risk digging methodology primarily deployed in coal extraction, called rat-hole mining. The process requires a worker to manually dig shafts into the earth just wide enough for a single person to fit through to physically reach and extract resource deposits. Accidents such as cave-ins and suffocation are so common that the hazardous practice is banned in parts of the country. With the breakdown of the auger machine, it was up to men like Qureshi, with the necessary skill, experience and mettle for the job, were now being called upon to assist.

It was a slow work week for Qureshi, who saw a video of the ongoing efforts and decided to head over—he was even prepared to pay his own way there. For him it was not just 41 men trapped in the tunnel—it was 41 families, brothers and fellow citizens; hard workers like himself, in dangerous jobs.

The next night, Qureshi and a few of his colleagues bought the tools they needed and set out. They shook and shivered as their Innova wound its way through the hills. They arrived at dawn even as rescuers were still trying to tackle the broken machine. Qureshi and the rest were ready to get to work after a short rest, that same evening. They surveyed the site and felt confident they could get the job done. But the authorities wanted to persist with the machines a bit longer. Frustrated, the men watched and tried to assist from the sidelines for three days as rescuers redoubled their efforts using special equipment. In the meantime, another team was working on the vertical drilling route.

Eventually, Qureshi and his comrades were called up. That day, Dix swapped hats with one of them, taking their yellow hat as a sign of camaraderie and giving him his own white one. He then went to the local priest and had the hat blessed.

At 3 p.m. on 27 November Qureshi and his men got to work using spades and shovels to clear the debris and scoop it into trolleys as the path in front opened up. They worked non-stop for two hours at a time—the cramped space, scant light and low oxygen supply making longer shifts difficult. Little by little, they cleared the steel debris, the concrete, and the stuck bits of the machine. As they inched further in, the men on the other side could sense the end of their ordeal was near.

Twenty-six hours later, on the night of 28 November, the hand miners finally broke through. The men on the other side clapped and cheered as they pulled Qureshi in. They lifted him off his feet and fed him from their rations of almonds and chocolates.

Having played their part, it was now time for the disaster response teams to take over. Stretchers, fitted with wheels, had been kept on standby to evacuate the trapped labourers. But the men refused them, and clambered out

inching forward on their haunches, one by one. They popped their feet out of the pipe, and felt the outside air wash over their tired faces. Negi was the last one out. As the leader, he wanted to ensure no one was left behind.



Gabar Singh Negi shares a warm embrace with Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dham

Each of the rescued men was hustled into an embrace with the chief minister, garlanded and sent off for medical tests. Ambulances at the site were pressed into action. Overall, it took around 300 people across government agencies to effect the gruelling 18-day operation.

As the men were whisked away to hospitals, Dix went back into the tunnel to check on the rescue teams. He counted, made sure everyone was okay and then emerged. A sense of contentment washed over him.

Amidst the applause and cheers for the freed men, firecrackers lit up the sky. To Negi, it felt just like Diwali. But it wasn't just him celebrating. It felt like the whole country was too.

The PoleStar Foundation

Website: polestar-foundation.org

For further information, contact:

Nachu Nagappan - +91 8939619676