

A TOUCHSTONE OF RISK: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON THE RESCUE EFFORTS IN THE SILKYARA TUNNEL IN UTTARKASHI

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Sunday went by, and while a day of rest for many, it marked [two weeks since 41 construction workers, building a tunnel as part of an ambitious road widening project, got trapped](#) inside. There is a massive rescue operation under way. When reports of the mishap first came in, nothing in the preliminary assessment by state authorities suggested that this would be such a drawn-out and challenging exercise. The [Silkyara Bend Tunnel](#) is a part of the Char Dham Pariyojana (project) in Uttarakhand that aims to improve connectivity to the religious pilgrimage sites of Gangotri, Yamnotri, Kedarnath, and Badrinath. The trapped workers were extending National Highway 134 to cut travel time by an hour. Now, hundreds of hours have been spent in what so far appears to be a slapdash rescue operation. The entrapped workers and their [families are undergoing extreme psychological stress](#). In hindsight, all this suggests that this was a project that ought not to have commenced in the first place.

Even prior to this mishap, environmentalists, scientists, and local residents had raised [concerns about the Char Dham Pariyojana](#). The project, which involves widening 900 km of roads via tunnels, culverts, by-passes and bridges, has long been criticised because it involves carving through Himalayan mountains in ways that greatly increase the chances of landslides and associated disasters. While the [project was finally approved by the Supreme Court](#), in the interests of “national security”, the government adopted the unusual measure of avoiding a comprehensive environment impact assessment (EIA) of the Char Dham Pariyojana by breaking it up into smaller, independent ventures. The peril of doing so is precisely what has unfolded: that the risks involved in engineering projects, in fragile ecosystems, are not properly accounted for. This is certainly not to suggest that engineering projects in the Himalayas are in principle flawed. The smoother roadways and newer economic opportunities that they may bring are worthwhile considerations and it is precisely to weigh the risks against the benefits that the EIA exists. Despite several instances of roads being washed away and dams breached, there is still the lack of an awareness that infrastructure development in fragile terrain requires much greater scrutiny, expertise and project-monitoring skills — and therefore much higher costs — than similar exercises in the plains and cities. The Silkyara tunnel disaster must serve as a touchstone against which future projects will be evaluated.

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