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The collective sigh of relief that swept India was almost palpable as news broke of the rescue of 41 workers who got trapped in a tunnel blocked by a cave-in on 12 November while it was being bored. Swings of hope and despair ended in jubilation as the last obstacle was cleared and a horizontal passage finally opened to the chamber where they survived on piped supplies and a national pledge to extract them safely.

Out they rolled, one after another. Not only did we owe it to them (it was a public works project), the extraction also upheld our prestige as a country that can mobilize resources for challenges full of uncertainty. While we exult in the nation's triumph, the hard questions raised by the ordeal must not get lost.

Why was there no escape route? Given the fragility of Uttarakhand's hilly terrain, was proper environmental clearance sought before this project got underway? As doubts have been aired, a probe could help clear the air. Second, apart from easing road access to pilgrimage spots, military needs reportedly drove this road-expansion plan. Could these twin benefits have unduly tilted the decision against what an even-handed assessment of risks would recommend?

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