

# Rescue in Mine Disaster

## An Interview with Jaswant Singh Gill

*'A divine light gave me the courage to go on'*

*Charanjit Rinni Sobti\**

*\* Amritsar News Line, Indian Express.*

Jaswant Singh Gill is the only living individual to have won the coveted *Sarvotam Jeevan Raksha Padak* – one of the highest civilian gallantry awards. This award has always been given posthumously. In 1991, three years after his extraordinary feat of saving 65 lives, he was bestowed with this honour along with four other who received them posthumously, Newline unraveled the details of the rescue operation which was the outcome of a single-man brigade – Jaswant Singh Gill.

### **What is your background?**

I belong to Jagdev Khurd, in Ajanala and did my schooling from Khalar School and college from 1945 to 1959. Later, I did my engineering from the Indian School of Mines (Dhanbad). I retired as Chief General Manager from Dhanbad and live in Amritsar now.

### **What happened on the night of November 13, 1989 at the Mahabir Colliery, Burdwan, in West Bengal?**

During a time blast, 71 miners got trapped in a mine and all entry and exit points had got blocked. An air pocket had been formed at a raised platform where they all had climbed for survival. There was water rushing into the mine and out of 71 people, six had already drowned.

### **What were their chances of survival?**

Very grim, because they had already been entrapped for two days and the water level was rising steadily and was threatening to collapse the air pocket. Carbon dioxide would have taken over and they all would have either drowned or died because of lack of oxygen. The equilibrium had been disturbed and the upper strata of the rock would have to come down and they would have all collapsed under the weight of the rocks.

### **What effort was being made from the outside to rescue them?**

There was a two-inch wide hole which had shown that there were still some survivors down in the mine, but we didn't know how many. Some of the officials felt that the situation was hopeless and it would be a waste to try and launch a rescue operation.

### **What was the actual rescue operation like?**

We located a place where a bore hole could be drilled up to a depth of 104 feet with a diameter of 22 inches. In the history of mine explosions, nobody had tried to bore a hole and rescue miners before. An indigenous tubular metal capsule, 6 ft 2 inches in height and 18 inches wide was made and suspended by a metallic wire rope into the bore hole.

### **What was the scene like, were people panicking?**

There was a gathering of about a lakh or so, some who were kith and kin, some were government servants while some others who had come out of curiosity. Food had been dropped down to the trapped through the hole, but nobody came forward to take over the rescue operation, which involved a lot of risk.

### **How was the journey into the mine?**

I went down at 2.30 a.m. because every minute was precious. Since the wire rope was very twisted, it was not guided by anything, the capsule was spinning like mad, making me dizzy. I had been earlier declared 'Best All-India Rescue Captain', but at that time, rescue was not under my purview. **Somehow, a divine light guided me down the dark abyss and also gave me the strength and courage.**

### **What was it like inside the mine ?**

It was total pandemonium, complete chaos. The trapped miners were hungry, injured and shocked. They refused to eat, all they wanted to do was get out. Controlling them was a huge task. I numbered them all because only one person at a time could come up. Those who had lost family members were sent up first, then the injured and the old and then the rest were marked according to the rank, the lower first and the higher later. It took 20 minutes per person to reach the top. Another reason for the panic was that the bore hole was not lined; slowly, the sides were giving in and underground water started seeping in from the walls. The entire operation had to be completed within 30 hours, because the walls would have collapsed after that.

### **Describe the scene that met you when you emerged from your ordeal.**

Newspapers, big and small, had gathered to cover the event. The huge crowd outside picked me up when I came out at 8.30 in the morning. The Chief Secretary and other top ministers of West Bengal were also there for the last three days. The Chief Minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu also felicitated me for my deed.

