

Divers foot stuck in four-inch pipe for two days

Purulia, Dec. 15: All attempts to extricate the right foot of diver Mukesh Kumar, stuck in a pipe inside a pitch dark and submerged chamber of a Purulia power project's reservoir since Sunday afternoon, remained unsuccessful till late Tuesday night.

It is feared that the 35-year-old father of two may not have survived the ordeal.

His intake of oxygen, being piped from the surface, dropped this morning, said officials involved in the rescue operations for over 48 hours.

"Until we get hold of the body, officially all that we can say is that efforts are on to get Mukesh out," said Surojit Dutta, project manager of the hydel power plant nestled in the Ayodhya hills, about 380km from Calcutta.

Divers from a firm in Barrackpore, on the fringes of Calcutta, who specialise in underwater rescue went down last night. "The suction at the mouth of the drainage pipe where his foot is stuck is too great," said Ashis Dutta, one of the four from the city.

Two divers went down in vain this morning.

In the afternoon, they tied Mukesh with ropes to pull him up from the surface, but it led to fears that his foot might get severed.

"His mask had come off and the body had become stiff because of the cold water and the enormous pressure at such depth," Ashis said.

PERIL 120FT BELOW

Mukesh Kumar's path

Dam wall

Pipe

Water

UNDERWATER CHAMBER
Supposed to be dry inside, but filled with water because of the leak

Trapped in chamber

Mukesh Kumar's foot stuck

How the 48 hours went

- **Sunday, 2pm:** Mukesh Kumar goes down to see the leaking pipe along the dam wall
- **3.30pm:** He doesn't surface. Another diver goes down and finds him trapped. His foot has got sucked into a pipe with a 4-inch diameter
- **4.30pm:** Panic-stricken Mukesh grapples with whoever goes near him, hampering rescue efforts
- **Monday, 10am:** Another rescue mission fails
- **10.30pm:** Rescue experts from Calcutta go down but Mukesh's leg can't be pulled out. The suction of the pipe is holding it back. Pulling him too hard can sever the foot
- **Tuesday, 2.30am:** Mukesh's oxygen intake drops
- **9am:** Rescue divers go down again
- **1pm:** Divers stop efforts to pull him out fearing that their arms could get sucked in. They tie him up and try to pull him from the surface

Mukesh Kumar

Mukesh has been under 120ft of water for over 48 hours and his diving suit is apparently not equipped to maintain pressure beyond 38 hours. Even when he was breathing normally last night, the authorities were concerned about the lack of nutrition and drinking water.

In Jhajjar, Haryana, where his wife Pinki lives with their children, the family has been informed about the developments. Other members of the team of seven with which Mukesh came to Purulia to repair an underwater leak called her.

The Mumbai-based Grafftech Marine and Engineering Company had assigned the job to the team from Visakhapatnam after officials of the Purulia Pumped Storage Project contracted it to locate and repair the leak in a reservoir chamber, first noticed in March.

Asked how the accident happened, Grafftech project manager C.K. Baruah said the foot must have been pulled in by the suction of the drainage pipe when he stepped on it. His teammates could not pull him out on Sunday afternoon because, the official said, a nervous Mukesh held on to them every time they came near him.

As a result of the leak in the pipe, the water level in the reservoir had been going down and hurting power generation.

Baruah said the job was to locate the leak in the inundated reservoir chamber, find out what had caused it and carry out repairs.

The repair work was to have been recorded on camera but there is no footage of Mukesh's dive.

Baruah admitted that such assignments were risky. "That is why divers with experience and capable of taking care of themselves are given such tasks. Mukesh had 10 years' experience behind him. He was associated with us for five years and was a senior member of the team. But accidents happen. His foot got pulled into the pipe by its powerful suction," he added.

The divers from Barrackpore, who were summoned on Sunday itself, took almost a day to arrive, allegedly because of a roadblock on Durgapur Expressway.

"We were held up by an agitation on the highway and then we had to find our way to the project site from Purulia town," said Ashis.

"Maybe the diver could have been saved had they reached by noon yesterday," an employee of the power plant said.

Another set of divers has started for Purulia from Rajahmundry in Andhra Pradesh. Their job will possibly be reduced to extricating the body.

Baruah promised a Rs 5- lakh compensation for Mukesh's wife in case he was found dead.

1.1 Leg sawed off, diver body pulled out

December 18, 2009



Mukesh's brother-in-law Lalit Kumar. (Mita Ray)Image: telegraphindia.com

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Purulia, Dec. 16: Diver Mukesh Kumar's right leg was sawed off and his lifeless body pulled out, 72 hours after his foot got sucked into a drainage pipe in an underwater chamber.

"All efforts were made to save him but we regret that they failed," said Surajit Dutta, the project manager of a Purulia hydel power project where Mukesh had come as part of a team assigned to repair an underwater leak.

When his body, bound by a rope, emerged from a 120ft vertical tunnel, the right leg was missing from the top of the knee.

The suction at the mouth of the drainage pipe was so great that it had drawn in the leg till almost the thigh, though it was only till the ankle that his had foot got stuck initially.

Two divers went down at 11.50am for the final mission. Santosh Bhuniya and Sanyasi Rao memorised the number of steps to be climbed and turns to be taken to reach the chamber with the help of those who had ventured into it earlier.

In the dark, flooded chamber, Mukesh was anchored in the foot but his torso wavered with the current created by openings in other drainage pipes.

It was a daunting task, especially for Rao. The man from Rajahmundry, Andhra Pradesh, had to cut Mukesh's leg to retrieve the body.

"We had worked together on a number of missions before. We have known each other for many years. Never had I thought I would one day have to do this," a somewhat shaken Rao said after coming up.

Bhuniya, from Barrackpore, near Calcutta, could not recall another such experience.

The leader of the Barrackpore divers, Ganesh Das, said Mukesh appeared to have made some mistakes while going down on Sunday. "He was not wearing flippers. Had he been wearing them, his foot would not have got stuck. He also took a wrong step inside the chamber," Das said.

Mukesh had 10 years of diving experience and the Mumbai company which had assigned him the job had described him as one of their best.

Mukesh's brother-in-law Lalit Kumar, who came from Visakhapatnam, was angry that he could not be pulled out yesterday.

“Why did the team from Barrackpore take a whole day to arrive (it reached on Monday night)? Why didn’t the Mumbai firm requisition the Rajahmundry divers earlier? Why couldn’t his leg be amputated on Monday itself, while he was alive?” he asked.

Contacted in Mumbai, C.K. Baruah, project manager of Grafftech Marine & Engineering, said amputation was the last resort and a move not without complications. “We had to eliminate all other options and proceed step by step,” he said.

Officials of the Purulia Pumped Storage Project said the task of locating and repairing the leak had been shelved for the time being.