

Facts about Tsunami: Its origin, earthquake link and prediction: An Opinion

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ABSTRACT

Tsunami occurs when there is a sudden and massive vertical displacement of ocean water because of tectonically induced deformation in the Ocean Crust. In spite of close association, there is no direct cause-and-effect relationship between earthquake and Tsunami. The earthquake waves which possess elastic properties cannot pass through a liquid medium, and hence are ineffective in generating a Tsunami. Tsunami may be generated because of several other non-tectonic reasons. But these are not as devastating as the tectonic types. Prevention of Tsunami is not possible, but warning signals should be seriously considered for mitigating the destruction caused by Tsunami.

INTRODUCTION

Tsunami is a Japanese word, meaning 'harbour waves'. The term was introduced by the fishermen who on return to the port(after fishing) found the area surrounding the harbour devastated by sea waves (Figure 1), a scenario which they had not encountered during voyage through the open sea/ocean.

The apparent paradox is because of the fact that the offshore Tsunami waves in the open sea have very small

amplitudes (several metres) compared to the extremely large wavelengths (often hundreds of kilometre long). It is because of that the wave passes unnoticed forming only a fleeting bulge over the mid-sea/ocean.

The Tsunami waves which appear quite innocuous in open sea move with high velocity. Using the mathematical formula illustrated in Figure 2, we find that for ocean depth of 5 km, the wave velocity would be about 220 m/sec, i.e. approximately 800 km/hr, which is comparable to the speed of a jet-propelled aircraft.



Figure 1. Devastation of the southeastern coastal areas of the Bay of Bengal during 26 December, 2004 Tsunami (Photo: AFP. From wave page of www.smh.com.au).

Editor's note:

As pointed out in the Editorial, this article reflects the opinion of the author. However, we must point out that though shear waves cannot travel through liquids, compressional (P) waves do. In fact, P waves, which are also generated during an earthquake process, arrive first at any location. A Tsunami is a water wave caused by a huge displacement of water in the ocean. Common examples of causes are earthquakes, landslides, and volcanic activity. The energy released into the water by these natural phenomena travels through the water in the form of a wave with exceedingly long wavelengths.

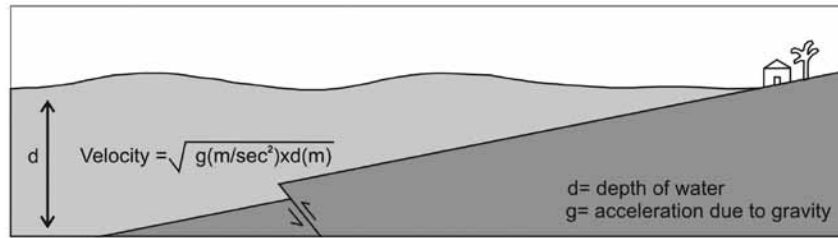


Figure 2. Cartoon diagram illustrating the mathematical relationship between depth-velocity relationship of Tsunami wave.

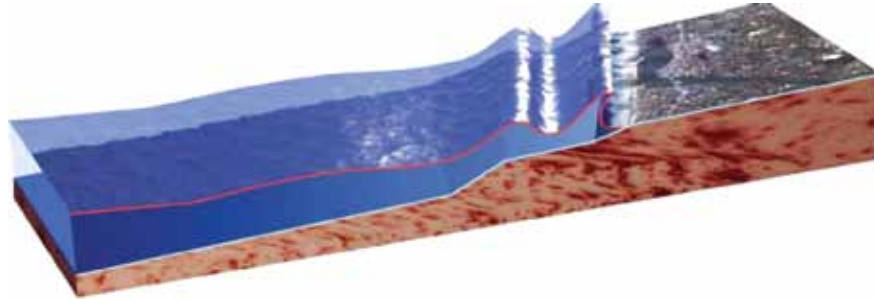


Figure 3. An artist's impression of buildup of Tsunami as the waves approach the shore line. (Courtesy: Wikipedia).



Figure 4. Tsunami waves after reaching the shelf sea region undergo manifold amplification, and looks like monstrous hydra heads. (Courtesy: Dr. Viacheslav K. Gusiakov, ICMMG, Siberian Division, Russian Academy of Sciences).

Dynamics of tsunami are essentially governed by the shallow water equations. The wavelength of a Tsunami wave (which is the product of velocity and time) is about 200 km having a period of 15-30 minutes in the open sea. In open sea thickness of water column could be as much as 3 to 4 km. As tsunami leaves the deep water of the open sea and arrives at the shallow waters near the coast, it undergoes a transformation, mainly due to a significant change in the water column thickness. Near the coast due to decrease in the water column thickness, the velocity of tsunami waves drop. However, the total

energy and the period of the wave remains the same. Due to such a combination of energy and wavelength, more water is forced between the wave crests causing the height of the wave to increase. Because of this, the tsunami waves which are imperceptible in deep water undergo manifold increase in wave heights, as they reach the coast (Figure 3).

A little before hitting the land, this slow moving wave is overridden by successive waves from the rear, and the composite wave after attaining a great height (at times over 70 m), and lashes the coastline like monstrous hydra-heads.

CAUSES OF TSUNAMI GENERATION

Confusion prevails over the processes of Tsunami generation. Tsunamis are traditionally described as tidal waves. This is because, on approaching the land, the Tsunami waves take on the characteristics of violent onrushing tide rather than the sort of familiar cresting waves formed by wind action upon the ocean. The essential prerequisite for triggering a Tsunami is the sudden displacement of sea/ocean water on a massive scale. Tsunami is generated as the disturbed water level attempts to attain equilibrium. The disturbed ocean water moving under the influence of gravity radiates across the sea/ocean similar to ripples in a pond. Because there is very little energy loss during the propagation of the Tsunami waves over the ocean water, the harbour waves, which finally strike the coastal areas assume awesome ferocity.

The process of Tsunami generation sets off with abrupt dislodgement of blocks of ocean floor rocks due to faulting with a strong vertical component of displacement. Two different situations are possible. Faulting can lift a part of the ocean floor vertically upward which in turn would push up the column of water above it creating a local bulge over the normal sea level (Figure 5A). On the other hand, if faulting causes down-sagging of the ocean floor relative to the adjacent part, a local depression in the sea water level is created causing ebbing tide. Such a situation may develop in Subduction Zones where the heavier Oceanic Lithosphere slides down below the lighter continental Crust (Figure 5B). In such a case, water is withdrawn from the coastal areas, resulting in a “ draw-down “ situation, a feature witnessed during 26 December, 2004, Indian Ocean Tsunami (Figure 6).

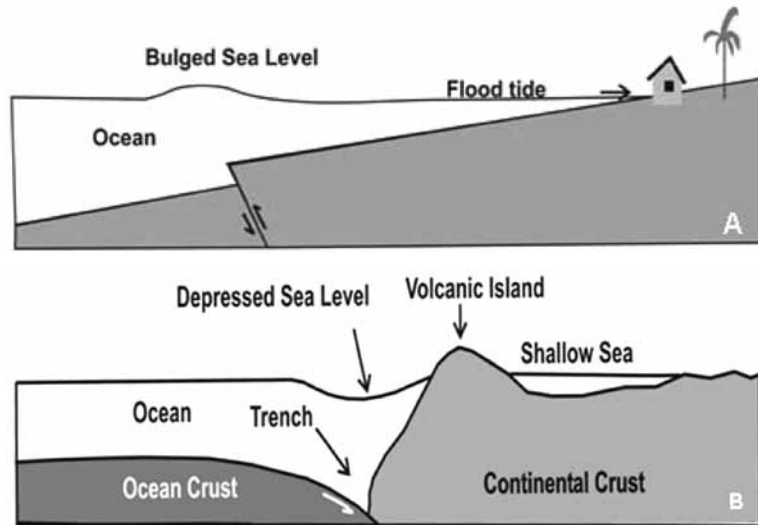


Figure 5 (A) Schematic diagram showing development of local bulge over the sea level because of uplifting of a block of Ocean Crust. This causes flood tide in coastal region. (B) Where fault causes down-sagging of a block as in Subduction Zone, a local depression in the sea level is created.



Figure 6. Draw-down situation recorded at Tiruchendur on 26 December, 2004, because of sudden receding of sea water (Photo credit: Geological Survey of India, Newsletter).

The Circum-Pacific belt is the most Tsunami-prone stretch in the world today which is characterised by the presence of deep Trenches over the Subduction Zones associated with an inclined zone of seismicity (Benioff Zones). Because of the down-sagging movement at regular intervals, a space is created virtually coinciding with the zone of Trenches. This in turn creates a sudden depression in the water column above the zone, leading to imbalance. The process that follows in attaining the equilibrium leads to generation of Tsunami waves. The tectonic situation of the 2004-Indian Ocean Tsunami is comparable to those that develop along the Circum-Pacific belt. The similarity is perceptible with regard to the source and nature of tsunami generation, due to massive down-sagging of the Indian Ocean Crust along the Java Trench.

Sudden displacement of huge mass of water (enough to cause a Tsunami) could also be due to processes other than faulting. These include:

- Volcanic eruptions near sea or underwater. The most horrifying example recorded in history was the eruption of Krakatao in Indonesia on 26-27 August, 1883.
- Large meteorite impacts on ocean water (no known instance is recorded in human history). However, presence of some 'erratic' deposits along the Gulf coast of Mexico and the United States was presumed to have resulted during the apparent impact of a meteorite about 65 million years ago near the tip of the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico
- Underwater testing of nuclear bombs (Nuclear testing by the United States in the Marshall Islands in the 1940s and 1950s generated Tsunamis).
- Massive landslides generated Tsunamis. The most

famous example of a landslide induced Tsunami occurred at Lituya Bay in Alaska (USA) on 9 July, 1958, producing a giant water wave that reached 524 metres up the local mountains. However, there was virtually no effect outside the bay region (Figure 7).

Besides these, a Tsunami could generate, if a landslide drops a huge mass of rock debris or an avalanche pours in huge chunks of ice mixed with rubbles of rocks and soils into sea or ocean. The Tsunamis generated by such processes generally have a localised influence: The waves generated usually dissipate quickly, and rarely affect the coastlines distant from the source because of the small area of the affected sea.

TSUNAMI-EARTHQUAKE LINK

All the Tsunamis in the Circum-Pacific belt are invariably associated with earthquakes. So intimate is the association that these 'harbour waves' are conventionally described as 'earthquake generated Tsunami' or 'seismic sea waves' (Roy, 2008). Impressed by the close Tsunami-earthquake link, some enthusiastic earth scientists have even attributed the circum-Pacific earthquakes as 'Tsunamigenic'.

Without refuting the Tsunami-earthquake link, the usage appears misleading because scientifically speaking both earthquake and Tsunami are manifestations of sudden dislodgement of rock masses during faulting, and the association does not bear any cause-and effect relationship (Roy, 2008). Earthquakes are vibrations in the Crust caused by moving energy waves released during the breaking (faulting) of 'strained rocks'. 'Elastic Rebound Theory' aptly explained how the energy released during disruption (or faulting) of strained rocks radiated from the source of origin



Figure 7. A landslide induced Tsunami affecting the Lituya Bay in Alaska (USA) on 9 July, 1958. It produced giant water waves that reached 524 metres up the local mountains. The non-forested areas of land lining (white) of the shore of the bay mark the approximate extent of the D.J. Miller, United States Geological Survey).

as elastic waves along the San Andreas Fault (Reid, 1906). It would be wrong to say that the earthquake waves can provide energy for generating a Tsunami. A point to remember is that no Tsunami was generated during severe earthquakes along the San Andreas Fault, a considerable part of which runs through the ocean floor. The reason is that the movement along the fault causing earthquake was of translational or strike-slip type, and did not displace water in any significant way. And the fact is that unless there is massive displacement of water, no Tsunami would generate even though the faulting might cause a high-intensity earthquake.

In the ill-famed 'Troika of Catastrophe' that marked the 1 November, 1755, Lisbon event, an earthquake-induced massive landslide into the Atlantic water generated a mega-Tsunami that destroyed many settlements all along the coastlines. But, even in that case, it cannot be said that the Tsunami waves were generated directly by the earthquake.

Earthquake can definitely be the cause of a type of 'enhanced' waves called 'Seiche' (also a Japanese term, pronounced 'saash'). The ground motion during an earthquake shakes the water back and forward at regular intervals setting off Seiche waves, which may at times and places be quite destructive. Such a Phenomenon, similar to Seiche waves, occurred in the southern Bengal coastal corridor on 26 December, 2004.

TSUNAMI PREDICTION AND POSSIBLE MITIGATION

We cannot prevent generation of a Tsunami, nor is it possible to make a precise prediction about it. There are, however, some warning signs of an impending tsunami. Mention has been made about the draw-down effect along beaches as an advance signature of incoming Tsunami waves (Fig.4). This happens when the displacement of water is linked with sudden down-sagging of the ocean floor (as it normally happens in case of Subduction related faulting). Under such a situation, there will be an unusual incidence of ebbing tide in the coastal regions; and the sea in such situations will recede from the coast, before the tsunami wave's arrival. If the continental slope is shallow, this recession can exceed many hundreds of metres. The time, for the return of water in form of giant 'harbour waves' might not be sufficient for the people to get prepared to face the impending disaster. Only those who have prior knowledge of tsunami resultant changes in the ocean wave dynamics saved themselves and others by rushing to elevated zones of the area. Others perished due to lack of sufficient time to run for safety.

One of the early warnings of an incoming Tsunami is sounded by the nearby animals, which have the ability to sense danger and flee to higher ground before the water

arrives. This was first recorded in the event of Lisbon earthquake-Tsunami on 1 November, 1755, in Europe. The phenomenon was also noted in Sri Lanka during the recent Indian Ocean Tsunami. It is said that animals may have the ability to sense subsonic seismic waves from an earthquake minutes or hours before a tsunami strikes the shore. Some other views about the animal behaviour have also been expressed suggesting that certain large animals especially the elephants are able to sniff out danger. This instinct forces them to flee in the direction opposite to the approaching roars of Tsunami waves.

In regions of high risk the 'Tsunami Warning Systems' are being used to detect approaching Tsunami to warn the general population before the wave reaches land. Since 1995, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) began developing the "Deep-Ocean Assessment and Reporting of Tsunamis (DART)" system. (Tsunami Information: www.ess.washington.edu/tsunami). Several stations have been deployed in the Pacific Ocean, which have 'pressure recorder' for detecting the passage of a Tsunami. The basic assumption is that the pressure of the water column is related to the height of the sea-surface. Any sudden change in the depth of the water column is indicated by a corresponding change in the water pressure. This in turn is an indication that a Tsunami is developing. The information is immediately sent to the 'Pacific Tsunami Warning Center' (PTWC) for dissemination to all concerned. The DART system rings out early warnings to all the Pacific coastal countries. We should however remember that the DART information from the Pacific would not be effective for the Indian Ocean region, because the Tsunamis developing in the Pacific would have no free passage to the Indian Ocean. Considering this, there is now an Indian Tsunami monitoring System working in the Indian Ocean.

Tsunami is an exotic word for us without having any equivalent phrase in Indian languages, unlike the earthquake and the volcano (Shetye, 2005). This clearly implies that the Tsunami is not a regular visitor in the Indian coastal regions. Truly speaking, there is no information about any dreadful appearance of Tsunami 'monster' in the region in the known history barring one that had lashed the northern coastal belts of the Arabian Sea on 19 June, 1945.-

The memory of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami is so fresh in our mind that it is not possible to disbelieve that the 'waves' that devastated the region were anything other than a dreadful Tsunami. Even if it is assumed that 1737 Calcutta event was a Tsunami of a scale comparable with the most recent one, there is hardly any reason to be panicky. Tsunami of 2004 magnitude may not happen in the near future, as this tsunami was triggered by a very high magnitude earthquake that destabilised large chunks of the crust.



Figure 8. Thick growth of mangrove along southern part of Sundarban seem to have helped in protecting the hinterland from the fury of December 26, 2004 Tsunami.

Japan has implemented an extensive programme of building Tsunami walls of up to 4.5 metres high in front of populated coastal areas. In some other parts of the world, floodgates and channels have been constructed to redirect the water from incoming tsunami. Without questioning the effectiveness of such Tsunami walls, it may be said that such a measure is economically unviable for the poor maritime countries in south Asia and Africa.

One useful suggestion, which might partly mitigate the effects of Tsunami is to plant trees like coconut, palms, and mangroves to cover the shoreline. The effectiveness of such a measure has been witnessed during the recent

Indian Ocean Tsunami when some coastal areas covered by trees have escaped virtually unharmed, because much of the Tsunami energy was worn out considerably in the tree-covered belts (Figure 8).

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