

# Tsunamis, Kelvin Waves, and Life

## *Musings of an Ocean Research Scientist*

*Traveling in a chauffeur-driven luxury car from Vellore to Chennai in India during the early hours of October 1, 2009, I took the first gulp of the freshly brewed cappuccino; and casually opened the neatly folded early morning newspaper to find the headlines screaming about the deadly tsunami in the Southern Pacific Ocean, which hit the tiny nations of Samoa and Tonga the previous day.*

*Reading about Samoa and Tonga rekindled old memories of a few years ago when we were still full of excitement and enthusiasm in life; an incident took place which was still vivid in my memory.*

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My good friend Dr. BM and I were deeply engrossed in a scientific discussion with our beloved senior, friend, and philosopher Dr. GK - regarding some of his recent research work on ocean dynamics in the equatorial oceans.

After analyzing the oceanic currents data collected during the recently concluded scientific cruise in the Equatorial Ocean south of the Bay of Bengal, GK hypothesized that his observations strongly indicated the existence of Kelvin Waves and that they are propagating westward.

Taken aback by the hypothesis of westward propagating Kelvin Waves in the North Equatorial Ocean, BM and I launched into a long-winded scientific oration expressed with sophisticated theoretical derivations peppered with sufficiently strong emotions - about the origin, propagation and non-dispersive characteristics of Kelvin Waves in the Northern Hemisphere.

BM and I valiantly argued with GK saying that Kelvin Waves in the Northern Hemisphere can only propagate eastward, and were gloating with satisfaction for our well-rounded scientific argument. As we were about to pat on each other's backs and offer well-deserved congratulations for a convincing scientific expostulation – we discovered to our abject dismay, that our brave argument could not move our beloved GK, even an inch - nay, 0.0254metres (for the benefit of SI unit puritans).

He had a pleasant smile, nodded his head (alas! we thought in agreement with our argument), and declared that whatever he proposed was right and we were wrong.

Collective wisdom garnered from countless interactions of colleagues, individually and collectively with GK, always concluded that it's practically impossible to convince GK, let alone win an argument once he decides something.

As GK was doggedly pursuing and reiterating whatever he thought was right, albeit with a very pleasant, smiling, and condescending face – we had no other option but to give up our valiant efforts.

Instead of tearing our hair (not that BM was having much even then), we diverted our attention towards the World Physical Map displayed prominently on the wall in Room 615 of our workplace at the Naval Research Laboratory of DRDO in Kochi.

Our other good friend (Dr. SK), who was well experienced with GK, and who had, by then, waged several battles and lost each one of them, was bemused and smiled condescendingly at both of us for joining his Club - BALM (Battered and Lost Members) - for which he was the undisputed President.

Never to admit our 'defeat,' BM and I coyly smiled at him and, on the spur of that moment, decided that we should go and live in a place far-far away from all the madding crowds, where no man can lose an argument, anytime, whatsoever; however wrong one could be.

We immediately decided that such a place could only be a faraway island, full of natural resources and native tribes, who would nod their heads in agreement to whatever was said, not argumentative, and most importantly, who we thought could be bossed around by us (obviously a very foolish, and an utterly wrong thought).

At random, I zeroed in on Samoa, and BM chose Tonga, both small South Pacific islands and tiny dots on the World Map.

On discovering tiny islands where we could go, boss around, and rule, our moods instantly buoyed up. Having found the elixir of happiness, we unilaterally declared ourselves the rulers of Samoa and Tonga. We felt on top of the world for pulling out this bloodless virtual coup that provided instant elation.

The next day, BM, who was ever vigilant to pull a fast one on me, discovered to my utmost horror, that half of Samoa was already occupied by the USA, who cleverly convinced the world to refer to it as American Samoa.

It was a shattering blow to me to discover that 'my' newfound country's extents were only half what had been expected. In addition, I had to deal with the pernicious problem of having the most powerful neighbor who could easily trounce me. BM had a wonderful day that day and slept very contentedly.

To my delight, the next day's papers declared that the Olympic Bronze medal for boxing went to a person from Tonga.

So happily, I chided BM that if the country has people capable of winning an Olympic medal, they should naturally be much more competent than us, who have not won even one Olympic Medal

by then. My profound argument was that BM could not rule Tonga, as the people there are much more competent than us (thus, by logic, BM).

Flabbergasted, BM had to concede to the logic of my argument and was depressed and sad.

Keeping up with the traditions of the rulers to remain unfazed by the myriad problems of everyday governance, BM and I decided to move forward and leave our fights to focus on being rulers who must deal with ever-evolving international and national issues, not necessarily tackling them, but conveniently pushing them to the dungeons of lost memories, for reminiscing on a later day.

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*I called up my friend BM living in Kochi, and after exchanging pleasantries over the phone, reminisced about our old days at the Naval Research Laboratory and mutually exchanged condolences - as 'his' country, Tonga, lost six people. 'My' country, Samoa, lost 120 people in the tragedy caused by the tsunami.*

*As a parting thought, I sternly declared that I would sack the Samoan PM - who was holidaying in Hawaii when the tragedy struck.*

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*This article was penned on the spur of the moment, in a lighter vein, after reading the news about the tsunamis which hit Samoa and Tonga on September 30, 2009.*

*The article only intends to share random thoughts on the prosaic tapestry, the irony, and the complexity of our lives - with profound respect and commiserations to the tsunami-affected nations, their leaders, and their people.*

(1075 words)

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