

### **Nature's Fury Compounded by Human Folly**

Dec 26 saw an unprecedented disaster killing more than 150,000 people, uprooting millions, and devastating the economy of vast regions in many nations in South and South-East Asia. But the real tragedy is not the unexpected trembling in the bowels of earth on the ocean bed. The destruction and suffering caused on account of an earthquake of 9.0 magnitude on Richter scale is unavoidable. Nor could we have prevented the tsunami that resulted from it. But we could have, and should have, anticipated the tsunami once we came to know of the earthquake in the ocean bed. And therefore, we should have warned the coastal populations of the danger ahead.

India and Sri Lanka had about 150 precious minutes after the quake before the tsunami hit our shores. Our science and technology establishments must have surely known and recorded the earthquake in Andamans and Car Nicobar islands. Even a casual comparison of the timings and magnitude of the tremors on Andamans and East-coast of Indian peninsula would have immediately indicated two facts: a) that the earthquake's epicenter was located further East of Andamans somewhere in the ocean bed, and b) it was of an unusually high magnitude. Once these two facts are known, the likelihood of a tsunami could have been anticipated instantly. All these conclusions could be drawn without consulting any other country, and without any elaborate global warning system.

If even this minimal level of alertness was exhibited by our science and technology establishments, they could have alerted the populations in the Andamans, on our East coast, and probably even Sri Lankan East Coast. The physical damage could not have been prevented, but precious lives would surely have been saved. This is a serious failure – not on account of absence of global tsunami warning system in the Indian Ocean, but because of the callousness of those whose job it was to monitor earthquakes and inform the population.

And it is the height of insensitivity and complete failure of imagination to say that even if authorities knew, they could not have alerted people. This would have been true 20 years ago. But today we have several 24-hour satellite news channels – global, national and local. The earthquake occurred not in the dead of night, but in the morning hours when people are hungry for news. The people of Aceh province of Indonesia probably had no real chance of saving themselves, given the impact of the earthquake itself, and the very short time gap between the tremors and the tsunami. But with some 150 precious minutes, Indians and Sri Lankans had a fair chance.

That lives could have been saved by advance warning is not a mere conjecture. Take the case of the 70,000 villagers on the island of Simeulue in Indonesia, 60 kms south of the epicenter of the earthquake. Amazingly, only 5 people died on the island, and all of them in the earthquake. Although 90% of the buildings on the coast were destroyed by the five-metre-high walls of water that followed, not one person died. In another town of Meulaboh, about 60 kms north-east of the epicenter, thousands perished in the tsunami. The miracle in Simeulue was possible because the people ran to the hills the moment the earthquake struck. We do not require a global warning system to anticipate a tsunami when an earthquake hits in the ocean bed.

It is not my desire to be wise after the event, or judge those in positions of responsibility harshly. Undoubtedly, the information available was not put together coherently in order to make sense, or to enable the political leadership and administration to draw reasonable conclusions and alert the people.

This failure is symptomatic of a deeper malaise in our public functioning. Our perception of public office is largely related to a sense of personal power. Most political and bureaucratic scuffles are for power as a private attribute, not about ideas, institutions and outcomes. In such a pervasive culture of power and position as personal goal for private gain, public good is the inevitable casualty.

In some ways, our strengths as a society have become a great source of weakness to our country. For most of us, our own family is all-important, and larger public good is incidental. There are, of course, outstanding public servants whose dedication and devotion to duty promote larger public good abundantly. A lady teacher in Guntur district (AP) who took on herself to visit the coastal villages on her two-wheeler without anyone's prompting and saved hundreds of lives is a glorious example of such devoted service. But sadly, such passion for public good is the exception, and not the norm.

If we judge our public servants by three yardsticks – integrity, competence, and commitment, most would only get a 'C' or 'D' grade. The reasons for this woeful failure are many. There are no real incentives for excellence, as good performance is rarely rewarded, and bad performance never punished. Actually good behavior is fraught with risks, and bad behavior is often rewarded! Then we have a culture of lazy policy and poor execution. Witness free power as a substitute to sensible farm policies and a search for panaceas to combat poverty instead of doing some painstaking work to improve education, healthcare and infrastructure. Finally we have no real sense of priorities, and the urgent always swallows the important. Public work which is regarded as glamorous – revenue, police etc – is often a symbol of power finding its expression as nuisance value. But the truly important areas – saving lives, healthcare, education – are often unglamorous, and examined only when catastrophe strikes.

Nature's fury cannot always be controlled, but the resultant tragedy can certainly be mitigated. That is the lesson we need to learn from this awesome tragedy which engulfed so many nations. But we also need to build public systems, and celebrate passion and spirit of public service in order to prevent avoidable suffering. A thorough and objective enquiry into the failure to warn people of the likely tsunami is necessary. Blaming the absence of a global warning system will be mere abdication of duty. We need an enquiry not to find scapegoats, but to understand the malaise that has crept in, and help us take corrective action for the future. The human failure in this tragedy is even more appalling than nature's ravage. There is no substitute to professionalism and passion for public good. These are priceless qualities which need to be treasured and nurtured.

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