

**If A Picture Paints 1000 Words?: How I Would Photograph My
International Experience?**

By

Roopa Swaminathan (Grad Student – Old Dominion University)

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A few Indians including myself got the following email along with a few photos a few weeks back. The email simply read:

The city of New Orleans, USA

Rains due to Katrina: 18 inches

Population of New Orleans: 484674

Deaths in 48 hours: 100

People evacuated: Almost the entire city

Shooting, rape and violence: Unimaginable

Time taken by the US army to reach New Orleans: 48 hours

Status 48 hours later: Still waiting for the army and power to be restored

Status after one week: Almost the same as above

USA: The world's most developed nation

The city of Mumbai, India

Rains on 26-27 of July, 2005 – 37.1 inches

Population: 12,622,500

Deaths in 48 hours: 37

People evacuated: 10,000

Shooting, rape and violence: None

Time taken for the Indian army to reach Mumbai: 12 Hours

Status after 48 hours: Back on its feet and business as usual

Status after one week: Comments overheard such as, “What rains?”/ “Life goes on!”

India: Third world country

The above was not meant to be hurtful or to point fingers at the biggest superpower of the world. Instead, behind the email and the photographs (which showed images of Hurricane Katrina victims) was a sentiment that was at once incredulous, empathetic and questioning in tone and a deep sense of sadness emanated from the one dominant question, “How on earth could such a thing happen in the United States?”

The fact that a hurricane struck wasn't the issue. Obviously not. But the havoc it created and the inability of this superpower nation to handle the aftermath of nature's fury still has many back in my home country India completely baffled. And having spoken to many of the foreign students from Nepal and Burma and Pakistan and China and Japan and Thailand and Peru and Argentina, they too have the exact same question. How on earth did this happen?

The putrid and unsanitary conditions, stinking toilets, carcasses rotting in some corner with children running around them, lack of sufficient food and practically no shelter for the thousands displaced by the hurricane, zero medical supply, the rape and looting and plunder of ordinary American citizens and their sense of self worth and dignity – these are images of squalor that are beamed on every major TV network. And as hard and as difficult as they are to look at, for many of us foreigners these are images that we have seen once too often before. For many living back home, such is life. Or so

Discovery channel would have us believe. But this was America. And Katrina took even us by shock.

Let me explain why.

See...for a lot of us who live in the United States either as students or as part of the work force...we are foreigners here. We are the displaced lot. We are typically from another country and come to the US to pursue our Masters degrees and then stay back. And despite some overt and not-so-overt anger and resentment at having taken local jobs (which is now on the rise with more American jobs being off-shored to China, India, Indonesia, Philippines, etc) – we plod along. Missing our home countries desperately but also quite happy to be in the Unites States. We may think we belong here but we are told repeatedly (especially by the INS) that we are “alien.” And rightfully so.

Thing is...as much of an outsider as we are here, after living in this country for a few years, when we go back to India or Peru or Brazil...many of us return home as “foreigners,” too. See, now that we have driven cars on smooth highways, the bumpy rides back home are too much to handle. Despite having lived with power cuts and water scarcity back home, a mere two years in the Unites States changes everything. Now when we return home for the summer, any electricity outages and lack of water for even one day, and life as we know it comes to a bit of a grinding halt. I guess that’s what living in a first world country does to you. Clean cities, cleaner toilets, no visible poverty – basically when a country’s basic infrastructure is the best of the very best - what’s not to like? Or get used to? So even when we are home and happy to be there, a part of us misses America desperately. No wonder that our family and friends treat us with a certain amount of derision and cynicism. They obviously cannot fathom how two years of life in

America can make us forget 20 years of living back home. And sadly enough – with time it gets easier to bitch and moan about the dirty streets, the vast disparity between the rich and the poor and corrupt governments and even more corrupt officials and mutter constantly to anyone who will listen, “Why the hell can’t our country be like the United States of America?”

But that was then. And this is now. If 9/11 caused many of us to stop and pause a little, Katrina and its aftermath has kinda stopped us visibly in our tracks. And I guess the email and pictures above were a gentle reminder to one and all that anything can happen. Anywhere. To anyone. At anytime. All bets are off and what you see is not necessarily what you will get. Many of the rapidly growing third world countries are not all about poverty, elephants and snake charmers on the streets. And really – the biggest superpower in the world - America is not all about being invincible.