I tend not to plan things—this usually works very well for me, when things are too planned I become stressed out, but when I can just float along I’m happy. One morning in Delhi I woke up and decided I wanted to go somewhere new. So I walked the five minutes to the train station, which was incredibly crowded. A Sikh man in a turban approached me: “Tourists must buy tickets from a travel agency, madam, would you care to accompany me?” Did he think I just stepped off the plane? First time out of my country? I ignored him and went into the station. The New Delhi train station is huge with the big vaulted ceiling so popular in British train station design. People were everywhere, children running around, men walking with boxes on their heads, women in saris. Voices from every direction and no direction, speaking Hindi, English, Punjabi and countless languages I didn’t recognize. Another man approached me to tell me “the tourist office is closed, madam” (and I hadn’t known the station had one), would I like to accompany him to his travel agency? So, ignoring him, I went to the line for locals. I looked at the list of trains leaving that day for Rajasthan and decided Jaipur sounded like a good place to go. There were no more second-class tickets available, so I purchased a third-class ticket.

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Purchasing a third-class train ticket is not the brightest thing I’ve ever done. I didn’t know yet about the tourist ticket office or how easy it was to bribe a conductor for an upgrade. I could have even waited a day or two until tickets were available, but I didn’t.

I returned to the train station in the afternoon to board my train. I was told there was a third-class lady’s car, so I went to it. All of the seats were already taken by women and children. I put my backpack on the floor, between two seats and that became my seat for the next six hours. The women in this car were poor.¹ No one rides third class if they can afford second class. Most of their saris were plain. No silks, bright colours or embroidery to be seen. There were women and children in the seats, on the luggage racks, on the floor, in laps. The number of people in such a small space was staggering. By the time the train left there were at least 100 women and children in the car. At each stop, more women got on and very few got off. After a few hours the smell of urine and sweat mixed with the familiar scents of oil, spices and chai.

As the train left Delhi the poverty of India became truly apparent, much more than the beggars in the streets. Soon after the train left the centre of Delhi, the view out the window became one long shantytown. The houses, if they can be called that, were made of corrugated tin, cardboard, and occasionally some scrap wood, sometimes even cloth substituted for a missing wall or door. There seemed to be no running water, electricity or any other kind of service. The shacks were small and crowded together. Rubbish was everywhere. Skinny half-naked children chased the train, while women carried jugs of water. This lasted for miles.
There was only one woman in the car who spoke English and the other women had her translate so we could speak. They told me about their children, families and homes. And I told them about mine. One woman lived in Ajmer and had been in Delhi visiting her daughter who had just had a baby; another was travelling to Jaipur looking for work. The women I was sitting between adopted me, and protected me from other women wanting to put their undiapered babies in my lap, and saved my place when I got up for a few minutes. The women shared their food with me, bought chai for me each time the train stopped, gave me samosas and other little tasties. I tried to buy chai for the women in the car, but I suppose because they viewed me as a guest they would not let me. I had to settle for giving the biscuits I brought with me to the children. The women on the train were so hospitable—that they would share so much with me—when I had so much more than them humbled me. While I really never want to experience six hours in a train car with 150 people again, it was an experience I’m glad I had. Rarely after that did I meet so many Indian women.

\(^1\) According to the World Factbook 25% of the population of India lives below the poverty line. The gross domestic product per capita is US$1016.16 according to the International Monetary Fund. This gives the average Indian slightly more than $3 or 130 Rupees to live on each day.