The Taj Mahal was looming in the distance when a Sikh man came up and offered me his help to photograph myself and my two Japanese friends. “I’ll give you a hand” he said, in fluent Japanese.

After an hour’s worth of promenading around the white marbled wonder, we got into a cab, and varoomed away on a journey through the dusty and narrow back streets of Agra. “I am approved by the government,” the old cabby proclaimed in the accent that Peter Sellers perfected in the movie, *The Party*. For 4,000 yen**,** he was taking us on a tour around the city, including boutiques and a bamboo thatched eatery called Only Restaurant. To get our yen, he had to vie with much younger and violent cabbies. One of them had heartlessly whacked him on the face.

To get to Jaipur, our next destination, we climbed aboard a huge white bus, parked near a few doorless single storied stone buildings. The driver had called it the Super deluxe bus. As we settled into the seats, it became clear that the only thing deluxe about the rig was its size. Otherwise it was an oversized jalopy.

Sari-clad ladies with their loin-cloth wrapped husbands and children started to board, followed by a group of teenagers dressed up in satin shirts and cotton trousers. Pretty soon the bus was filled over capacity.

We were attired in casual clothing. But the eyes staring at us seemed to be thinking differently. After all, they were the eyes that were used to seeing cattle, elephants, wide expanses of fields, and vultures roving around in cloudless skies, instead of crows perched on telephone cables. Before I knew it, I was contemplating escape from this apparently non-tourist milieu.

The bus finally pulled out of its karmatically ordained position an hour later. Some Indian pop, a rowdy jam session of tabla remixed with techno sounds and histrionic vocals, evocative of a banshee in heat, blared out at a mind-blowing volume. The bus was not even air-conditioned.

Outside, cows sauntered about the fields that were McDonalds free, while the occasional camel, although reined with leather straps, trod along in its regal gait, whipping

up a light brown sand cloud in its wake. As the bus sporadically swerved in and out of its lane to overtake human, animal, and automobile traffic, the sky was turning into a charismatic orange. A young girl seated ahead of me was also marveling at this grand scene with a distant look in her eyes, as a multicolored garland, hung over the driver's seat, swayed to and fro with serene abandon. The loud music had changed from an earache to a wayfarer's anthem. By that time my paranoia had waned, and I began to feel a kinship with the other passengers, my fellow vagabonds.

One of the teenagers seated behind us spoke up and started to talk in an English he had picked up from watching the V channel, a satellite station beaming music videos from Hong Kong. He seemed desperate to get some kind of picture of life in Japan. I spewed out the names of a few famous Hindi actresses that came to mind. Pretty soon we attained intercultural understanding, shaking hands to immortalize the moment of two Hindi cinema fans bridging the Sea of Japan and the Silk Road.

It was night by the time we arrived in Jaipur, the palatial city of pink. When we got off, we left for the Rajputna Sheraton Hotel, leaving behind a piece of real India.