

# *Eternally Enchanted*

*Dr. Bikash Ranjan Meher*

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# CHAPTER



**T**hat was his second trip to Pondicherry, an erstwhile French colonial settlement and now the capital city of the Indian union territory Pondicherry. Dr. Abhishek had been to Pondicherry once before, neither to stroll lazily along its famous seaside promenade nor to swill booze available aplenty, but to overcome a seemingly insurmountable challenge; MD entrance examination for Jawaharlal Institute of Post Graduate Medical Education and Research or JIPMER as it is popularly known. He didn't have any penchant or proclivity at that time to fall in love with this exotic beach town. He hadn't even in wildest imagination thought that one day “The Indian *Côte d’Azur*” would become an indispensable part of his memory.

Life is an endless saga of twists and turns. In such a turn of events, he received an offer to join as a senior resident in General Medicine from a medical college hospital in Pondicherry and thus his beautiful journey to the picturesque Pondicherry begun.

Pondicherry, “the Riviera of East” although equally popular among Bohemian tourists and spiritual seekers for its pristine beaches, beautiful boulevard, immaculate cathedral, and magnificent Matrimandir, still, it didn't have direct air or rail connectivity to many parts of India. Chennai is its nearest big city and gateway to the world and Pondicherry is connected to it both by enticing East Coast Road and swanky Grand Southern Trunk Road. Abhishek commenced his train journey on the iconic Coromandel express which starts from Howrah junction and traverses the entire length of East Coast to reach the Southern hub of Chennai.

Train journeys in India are an exquisite and enriching experience where one can catch the glimpses of the rich diversity of this great nation. One can find a turbaned Sikh engaged in an animated discussion with a dhoti (Veshti) clad Tamil about the issues ranging from cricket to cinema to politics sharing their roti and rasam. It is entirely not inconceivable for a middle-aged Bengali aunty to find an alliance for her New Jersey based computer engineer niece on a train journey from Kolkata to Rameswaram. However, it is not always as blissful as one would hope, it could sometimes be miserable when you get to share a berth with snoring fellow passengers or have to swallow the disgusting pantry food. Abhishek usually preferred to spend time on a journey by delving into a novel or listening to Kishore Kumar classics. That journey also wasn't any different.

After twenty-four hours of uneventful journey, he reached Chennai Central railway station past midnight. The station was still buzzing with passengers. Without wasting any time, ignoring the pestering chants of "Vanakkam" and strained attempt at Hindi from the auto and cab drivers he maneuvered through the chaos to the pre-paid taxi stand which was situated just in front of the main entrance. He booked a taxi for CMBT, Chennai Mofussil Bus Terminus without much of a hassle as the twenty-four-hour booking counter was relatively free.

The taxi driver Mr. Muthu Kumaran was a middle-aged man with an infectious smile and gentle demeanor. He greeted Abhishek "Vanakkam" and asked courteously Sir, Enge *Porenngge*? "Anna, I don't understand Tamil. Can you speak Hindi or English?" Abhishek said and handed the advanced booking slip to Mr. Muthu.

*"Hindi, illie sir ...English I know little....."* Mr. Muthu replied with humility.

"You want to go Koyembedu?" Mr. Muthu asked Abhishek while guiding him to the car. Mr. Muthu helped Abhishek in putting luggage in the boot space.

As Abhishek was chatting with Mr. Muthu on the way from Chennai Central to Koyembedu, something caught his attention! The enormous posters of Amma (Miss Jayalalitha) adorned every available inch of vacant walls. Her big cut outs were erected at crucial traffic junctions as if to send a stern message that she was the undisputed queen of Tamil Nadu, "Amma" to her countless followers, and "*Puratchithlalaivi*", the supreme

*commander of AIADMK. She was at the helm of power at that time; had bucked the trend by successfully retaining power for another term. Posters of other politicians were also jostling for space as if vying for the attention of the onlookers. Some of the faces were familiar to Abhishek and some were unfamiliar at that time. Another familiar picture was that of superstar of Tamil cinema “Thalaiva” Rajinikanth. He was posing alongside a pretty but much younger actress for his upcoming magnum opus. It is indeed difficult for people in the north of Vindhya (North Indian) to understand the Rajini Phenomenon.*

*Why is he such a rage in the South?*

*Why is he “Thalaiva” to all Tamilians?*

*Why do his rustic charms bewitch the young and old alike?*

For Abhishek until then Rajinikanth was like any other Bollywood actor of yesteryears. He had watched some of his old Hindi movies like *Giraftar*, and *Andha Kanoon* where he had played second fiddle. Abhishek particularly remembered him for his signature style of lighting the cigarette.

The taxi stopped at CMBT bus stand. The driver was kind enough to guide Abhishek to the bus bay where Pondicherry buses were parked. Abhishek preferred a Volvo for traveling to Pondicherry.

# CHAPTER



**O**n a bright shiny Monday morning, Dr. Abhishek arrived in Pondicherry. Like any other day, the Sun was gloriously rising in the eastern sky as if getting ready to scatter his blessings abundantly on planet Earth. He got off the bus in Pondicherry New Bus stand. He didn't notice any drastic change since his last visit.

He was completely knackered after a hectic train and the subsequent bus journey, so rather than exploring the much sought-after budget hotels near Rock Beach he checked into a hotel located near the Main bus terminus on the left side of Adigar Madimalai Street. After settling down in the hotel room, he checked his cell phone to find three missed calls from his mother; He immediately called and informed her of his safe arrival. He then texted the hotel address to Miss Shanmugam Sundhari, who oversaw the human resource department of the hospital. She was the point person for the recruitment of doctors at the hospital. She had told Abhishek to text the hotel address once he reaches Pondicherry so that a vehicle could be sent to fetch him from the hotel.

He made himself a hot coffee and lazed in the bed for almost an hour. Mixed emotions were running through his head as he was about to embark on his professional journey in an alien place. His phone beeped; Miss Sundhari texted back saying that vehicle would be there in half an hour. He drank another cup of coffee quickly before stepping into the shower. The deliciously warm water rejuvenated his tired body. He wore a neat formal shirt and trouser and headed down to the lobby to wait for the car but not before grabbing a quick breakfast.



A Tata Sumo arrived at around nine O'clock to pick him up from the hotel. The hospital where he was supposed to join was not a fancy corporate hospital of massive reputation but a five-year-old private medical college. Initially, he was a bit hesitant to join and even declined when they first offered him the job but subsequently changed his decision as he thought he would get ample time to prepare for his super specialization examination.

The driver dropped him off near the entrance to the office of Miss Shanmugam Sundhari. After completing the formalities of joining which were surprisingly easy and convenient, he was guided by a lady assistant to the department of General Medicine. He was greeted there by a young man of his age, sporting an affable smile and French beard. The gentleman introduced himself as Dr. Salahuddin, a senior resident in department of medicine.

“Hello! I am Dr. Abhishek Anand.” Abhishek replied, shaking hands with Dr. Salahuddin. Salahuddin took Abhishek to the chamber of the chief (HOD) of General Medicine department, Dr. P. R. Murugesan. Abhishek submitted him copy of the appointment letter and joining report. Walking through the corridor, while returning from chief's office, Abhishek told Salahuddin that Ms. Shanmugam Sundhari had told him to meet the dean of the hospital.

“His office is in the first floor”, Salahuddin said.

As both of them were walking down on the staircase towards the dean's room, Salahuddin said that this was a routine affair. The dean wants to meet every consultants and residents before they commence their duty. He also mentioned that though the dean is little eccentric but he is a nice human being and pioneer of bariatric surgery in Tamil Nadu.

“What about the chief?” Abhishek casually asked.

Salahuddin gave Abhishek quizzical look and said “He is a nice gentleman and a par excellence clinician. He took voluntary retirement from Stanley medical college and joined here as the head. He doesn't poke his nose in anyone's business as long as the department is running smoothly”.

“That's a trait fast vanishing among medicine heads”, Abhishek joked.

Salahuddin smiled wryly.

“How is the workload here?”. Abhishek asked inquisitively.

“It is not hectic. You will have ample time to prepare for the DM examination”, Salahuddin replied with an affable smile.

“That’s impressive, how did you guess that?” Abhishek grinned.

“Birds of the same feathers flock together”, Salahuddin replied with a wider grin.

Both of them shook hand again.

As it was the first day, chief didn’t assign any duty to Abhishek. He told him to have a look around of the hospital, and complete other formalities such as allotment of staff quarters, enrollment in the faculty mess. He instructed Salahuddin to help Abhishek in getting things done as Abhishek didn’t understand Tamil. Chief also instructed Salahuddin to introduce Abhishek to other medicine consultants.

Salahuddin took Abhishek for a cursory visit of the General Medicine department. It had one big lecture theatre for undergraduate classes and one small demo room for the seminar and short case presentations. All senior residents and consultants were allocated individual chambers. He then took him to OPD (outpatient department) of General Medicine which was functioning in the ground floor in general OPD block. The hospital was a multi-storied building and an entire second floor was exclusively allocated to the General Medicine department.

After completing the formalities, Abhishek sat with Salahuddin in latter’s chamber as he hadn’t been given a chamber of his own yet.

“As far as I know you are the first North Indian to join here in the brief history of the hospital. Why did you join here? I mean it’s so far from your native place”. Salahuddin asked Abhishek inquisitively. “Is the DM preparation sole motive?”

“Frankly I don’t have any answer for that. I don’t know whether I chose Pondicherry or Pondicherry has chosen me. But yes, you are right; DM preparation was very much on my mind when I decided to accept the offer letter”, Abhishek replied looking at Salahuddin.

“It’s good for me, I have got a good company,” Salahuddin said smilingly.

“Which super speciality branch?” He asked.

“From the very beginning, I always wanted to be a cardiologist, Abhishek replied.”

“What about you?”

“Gastroenterology is my favorite branch but I can’t afford to wait for it till eternity. If I won’t get in the first attempt, I will go to the Middle East.” I have family commitments and need money for that. Salahuddin replied nonchalantly. He then solicitously asked, “Have you had your breakfast?”

*Abhishek was impressed by his frankness.*

“Yeah, I had it in my hotel but what I need now is a coffee. Where can I get it?”

“We have to stretch our legs a little as the cafeteria is in the research block adjacent to the hospital,” he said jocularly. “Coffee is great there, the canteen in the hospital block is closed for a week because of some renovation work”, Salahuddin added.

“No problem, in fact, I would love to do that, I will get the chance to explore the hospital,” Abhishek said smilingly.

Both went to the cafeteria, which was situated in the ground floor of Research block, a three-storied building in between the hospital and academic block. The coffee was awesome but the ambience wasn’t that great.

The first day went on by chatting to Salahuddin, listening to his hilarious jokes and meeting colleagues from medicine as well as other departments. Salahuddin enthusiastically introduced Abhishek to everyone, but it was very difficult for Abhishek to remember their names which sounded strange to his ear and unpronounceable at that time. In the evening Salahuddin helped Abhishek in shifting his belongings to the allotted quarter. Abhishek was impressed by the friendly gesture and jovial attitude of Salahuddin.

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