



# Ranga

HALF-PANTS



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*To my father,  
S.N.C. Ranganathachari.  
The funniest man I've ever known.*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would not have written this book if not for the constant encouragement, reassurance, and critique from my wife Dr. Chitra. S a.k.a my worst critic. She gave me the courage to quit my day job and pursue this dream. Chithu, thank you for celebrating the best in me and condoning the worst. I am sure the latter far outweighs the former. Also, thank you for paying the rent.

This book wouldn't have seen the light of day if not for my agent Kanishka Gupta. He is a boon to writers – aspiring and established – in India. Like I always say, “K, you da batman!”

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Thank you, Sonali Zohra for the beautiful cover. Thank you, Krish Ashok for helping me produce the song *Ranga Half-Pants*.



Ravi, Lodda, Karrodu, Kombu, Chombu, and White Dog, I am sure you will see glimpses of our wonder years in this book. I hope you do!

I'd like to give a big shout-out to my school gang from BZHS. Especially to Budda *machan*, Venkata, Anil, and Sivakumar. And how can I forget Krishna D.K. who is a Bollywood director now! Back in the day we used to write stories and critique each other. Thank you, D.K. From chasing it to living the dream, it has been a long, long journey. Thank you for everything.

Suresh Kumar Alliraju, just take 50 grams of mixture and... You know what to do with it. Imthiyaz, stop staring at the *vennela, ra!* Suren, relax, my next book is about you.

Anand Krishnamurthy, Krishnan Ramaswamy, Chandru, Kingsley, Ravindra Vijay, Shreyas, Raj Subramaniam, Blinston Fernandes, Shanker Chakrapani: thank you for everything.

If I have left you out – Yes, you with that mighty frown staring at this page – sorry *machan*, it is the Old Monk, not me.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The story of *Ranga Half-Pants* is set in Chittoor. I borrowed the settings and backdrop from the town, but all characters featured in the story are fictitious. A probable exception is the character of Gaja. I designed Gaja based on C.K. Umapathy, a dear friend. This is a tribute to the beautiful person that you are, *ra* CK. Don't sue me. Not yet. Sorry for setting my dog on you in 1987 when you came home asking for the money I owe you. Looks like I will repay you soon.

All incidents, characters, names in the story are fictitious and a work of my imagination, of course. However, I admit that my life in Chittoor, especially between 1988-93, was a source of inspiration in crafting the story of *Ranga Half-Pants*.

The biggest fear of a writer is putting his or her work out in the open. It took me almost a year after I had finished writing the first draft to even consider sending the book proposal. I took a leap of faith and I hope you enjoy Ranga's journey as much as I did crafting it.

You can stay in touch with me on Twitter @sumank. I look forward to hearing from you.



## ONE

RANGANATHAN STOOD OUTSIDE his home waiting for the auto-rickshaw to appear on the curve of the main road. It was a sultry Sunday afternoon in Chittoor. Ranga could smell the mutton masala being cooked in the neighbour's kitchen: it was pungent, aromatic and weirdly alluring. He thought of his father going, "Shut the windows *di*, Alamelu! I can't bear this disgusting odour." Sure enough, he heard the windows being shut. *Appa* hated the neighbourhood. They were surrounded by meat eaters. On Sundays especially, when the entire neighbourhood was getting ready to feast on chicken, mutton and what not, *Appa* shut himself up in his bedroom and ventured out only the next morning.

"I am from a royal *Iyengar* family!" Srinivasan, Ranga's father, often proclaimed. "I am Nallan Chakravarthi Srinivasan. Not any ordinary Srinivasan!" He proscribed non-Brahmin friends to Ranga. Even Gaja, Ranga's best friend, did not make the cut. They had argued for weeks before a troubled truce was reached over Gaja, because he

was a *Komiti* – a vegetarian (but still not as pious as an *Iyengar*, *Appa* had underlined).

Ranga walked towards the main road and sat on the concrete bench over a culvert. Humming a Chiranjeevi song, he looked at his legs.

He wanted a perfect fit. *Appa*'s bell-bottoms were municipality-friendly, for they swept the road. That was probably why the bottoms were reinforced with metal zipper material – to prevent any damage to the fabric. *Appa* looked funny in those bell-bottoms. He was a tall, thin man and when the breeze picked up, the trousers flapped, outlining his spindly legs.

Unlike his father, Ranga wasn't proud of being an *Iyengar*. It worked against him at school, while playing cricket and even in fights. He called them fights but he couldn't remember when he had last thrown a punch at an opponent. Probably never. There was this inexplicable fear that gripped him when fights broke out.

Ranga found it hard to believe that getting paralyzed by fear when faced with a fist fight was in his genes. That's what everyone said though, "You Brahmins are good at studies because you can't fight wars." And they also spun stories about how wily Brahmins were the reason why meat prices went up. Because *they* started eating meat!

Ranga wanted to be like that Prasad. Everyone in Chittoor was in awe of him for standing up to Chanti, the MP's nephew and a notorious thug, who caused much strife to the locals.

It was nice to listen to stories of their fights and hear people talk about someone like Prasad, but life was not so easy. Especially when you were a Brahmin boy who didn't know how to fight.

It was like his fear of ghosts. He *knew* that they didn't exist. How could they! But whenever he had to walk alone at night – the colony slept early, at nine in the evening – he would piss in his pants. Well, okay, not pants, but half-pants. After watching the evening show at Venkateswara Cinema, all his friends would take a shortcut through the burial ground in Greampet, but he would take the circuitous way through High Road. Because... ghosts! The very thought of them gave Ranga chills. What did they say? The Mohini *pisaachi*, clad in a white sari (and with jasmine flowers in her hair), had a soft corner for young boys; young boys in half-pants, especially.

The auto was closer now. Shobha Paradise, the only readymade clothing showroom (the only decent one, that is) in Chittoor was advertising its *Deepavali* collection. The auto had loudspeakers attached to it, with its sole passenger screaming into a microphone. “SHOBA PARADISE! *Aalasisichina aasabangamu! Nayday vichheyandi,*” he announced. It roughly translated to ‘Don't delay and be disappointed! Visit today!’ A bunch of screaming kids was running behind the auto.

He was not interested in readymade clothes. Tailor Suresh had warned him about ‘readymade’.

“You'll buy a shirt. It'll be very nice, but once you wash it, your shirt'll become a handkerchief. Don't tell me I didn't warn you, *ra!*”

He wanted spun material. That's what Suresh always recommended. Spun. Chocolate brown 'narrow' trousers with sharp creases. That was for informal occasions, reserved for special outings like watching his god Chiranjeevi's movies first day, first show. However, if his father relented and got him at least a pair of khaki trousers, his school uniform, life would become bearable.

Only three of them wore half-pants in class these days, the front benchers – Ranga, B.K. Rao and Siva. Their school – Chinnama Naidu High School – was reopening after the *Dasara* holidays the next day and Ranga feared that the Half-pants Club might experience some attrition.

Wasn't there a saying in Tamil which meant 50 percent of you is what you wear? One-by-two? How sweet! That was his nickname in school too. The thought of it hurt. One-by-two! That bastard, son of a mongrel, Joel! He was behind the now popular sobriquet. Just out of the blue, one fine day, Joel had called out: "Hey Ranga! ONE-BY-TWO!" And it stuck, just like that! No rhyme or reason. ONE-BY-TWO. BOOM!

The auto approached, coughing out inordinate amounts of smoke and interrupted Ranga's deep thought. It was, for sure, running on kerosene. He hurried to collect a leaflet thrown out by the announcer. On one side, the leaflet showed offers on their ready-to-wear collection and on the other, the offers on clothing material. "Buy two pant-materials and get one free!"

He stood there watching the rickety vehicle climb the incline and immediately disappear down the slope right at

the end of the colony. He stared at the leaflet and took a deep breath. By now he had a collection of such handouts.

Their rented house was an independent building. Two massive *ashoka* trees stood in the front like faithful guards. Inside, a range of trees occupied the perimeter. A *mosambi* tree on the right, four coconut palms – one each in the four corners of the plot – and Ranga’s favourite, the guava tree in the backyard, adjacent to the well.

He sat under the guava’s shade, savouring his lunch. He loved eating outside, especially when his mother made his favourite food. Today was one such day. She had prepared *usili* and *mor kozhambu*. A crow sat on the sunshade and stared at him expectantly, but Ranga was in no mood to entertain it.

His father walked out and performed his elaborate ritual of washing his hands twice and gargling 570 times.

“Why are you eating like a rickshaw puller, sitting outside?” Srinivasan glowered. Ranga didn’t know what that meant. He had never seen a rickshaw puller eat.

“I like it here, *Appa*.”

“Whatever! When have you ever listened to me?” Srinivaan muttered and was about to walk back in when Ranga stopped him.

“*Appa*, about my trousers...”

“What about them?”

“About those full pants, I mean.”

“Not a problem. I don’t wear that old coffee brown one



anymore. We can have a tailor alter it and you can wear it.”

Before Ranga could say anything else, his father hurried inside as if he wanted to avoid the topic. Ranga sighed and threw a chunk of *usili* to the crow.

What was worse than bell-bottoms?

Altered bell-bottoms.



Bus number four stopped at the Shakti Colony entrance and its driver played the musical horn twice as Ranga ran towards it. He waved at the driver and sat in his favourite window seat. It was half-past seven in the morning and he was already a little late. The school gate shut at eight.

His school was a few blocks away from the Chittoor central bus station. As the bus made its way through Greampet, a sinking feeling gripped Ranga. Today was the first day after *Dasara* holidays and the thought of the quarterly examination results converted the sinking feeling into a full-blown anxiety attack. He hugged his school bag tight. If it were just his academic performance, it was all right. There was worse to come. Ranga bit his nails off in a hurry.

The bus reached its destination and Ranga got down and dragged his feet on his way out of the bus station. He crossed Arcot Sweets, the world famous sweetmeat shop in Chittoor district and entered Naidu Street. The town was alive already. Sukha Vilas, where you got the best *rava dosa*, was housefull. The Pookkaaran Street, a

dedicated flower market, was a riot of colours. Legend had it that the market was established way back in 1886, though the historical accuracy of it was, well, at best dubious.

Ranga felt a ‘whackkk!’ on the back of his head and he crashed to the ground. He was disoriented for a few seconds and when he came to, he spotted Joel guffawing and speeding away on his bicycle.

“*Lanjaakodaka!*” he screamed, but Joel was long gone. Ranga collected his books, put them back in the bag, and started walking. That’s when he noticed Sadasivan, his Math teacher and headmaster, staring at him. ‘Blade’ Sadasivan. *Ngatha*, I am finished! Ranga thought as he ran to school. If Blade had heard the profanities he had screamed, then he was in for another long session on ‘How to conduct oneself as a Brahmin boy’. There was a reason why he was nicknamed ‘Blade’.

As soon as Ranga crossed the gates, the bell went off for prayer. He ran into his classroom, dumped his bag and ran back to stand in the line, right in the front where short people stood. To his right was 9th C. On his left were the bossy 10th standard boys. The girls’ row was separated from the boys’. Ranga craned his neck to spot Kaivalya and failed.

The prayer meeting began with the singing of ‘*Maa telugu thalliki mallepoo dhandaa...*’ by a girl with a boy’s voice. Blade made some announcements after the prayer. Joel Yesupadham was made the Assistant School People’s Leader (ASPL) – a first for 9th F section. The school

had started an 'aided' section (which meant students paid a monthly fee) about three years ago. As a result, F section attracted students from relatively better economic background, kids of government officers, lawyers, doctors and the like. However, when it came to performance, be it academic or extra-curricular, F section students lagged behind. It was the C students who bagged the state ranks in the SSLC exams and trophies for the school in sports. The rest of the school thought F kids were pampered losers and that they were around because they could afford to pay the monthly fee. So Joel becoming the ASPL was a shot in the arm for the F brigade.

Excellent! Just what I needed, Ranga thought.

Just then Blade paused his speech and stared directly at Ranga. Ranga's knees shook. He is going to expel me, Ranga was sure.

"As students of this prestigious institution, you are bound to behave according to the school's code of conduct, not just inside but also outside the school," Blade started. "I noticed that some of our students use expletives... those that would make the most evil of men squirm with disgust!"

Ranga thought he saw foam form at the corners of his headmaster's mouth. Blade's speech was reaching a crescendo now.

"If I ever catch you spewing gutter language, I will not hesitate to expel you and I will ensure that you will never get admission into any school in the district!" Blade was now staring straight at Ranga.

“Why is he looking at us?” Siva whispered.

“He caught me describing Joel’s mother’s character,” Ranga mumbled.

“What?”

“Never mind.”

It struck Ranga only after he entered the classroom, not when he walked alongside with Siva and B.K. Rao. When their Physics teacher J.K. walked in, it hit him. It was as if someone dropped a Cuddapah bomb in his *lungi*.

J.K. walked in and they all stood up and did a sing-song “Good maaaaaarningggg saaaaaarr!” The teacher adjusted his thick-framed spectacles and grunted. That’s when Ranga noticed that both Siva and B.K. Rao were wearing full trousers.

“What the *ngotha!*?” Ranga screamed.

J.K., who had just started writing on the blackboard, turned around and said, “Excuse me?”

Ranga shook his head vigorously and sat down.

The teacher got back to the board and was soon lost in Kinetics.

“How could you bastards do this to me?” Ranga hissed.

Both Siva and B.K. shrugged.

“Haven’t you noticed the thick vegetation on my legs? My brother-in-law bought this for *Dasara*. Nice, no?” Siva said.

Ranga was still in shock.

“Don’t worry, your legs are smooth like Silk Smitha’s. You can push it for another 10 years with half-pants,” Siva added.

Both B.K. and Siva sniggered at the joke.

Ranga was incensed. He bit his lip and kept quiet. He hated them for pulling this fast one on him. They could have at least warned him!

During the break, Ranga stayed back in the classroom. He didn’t want to venture out. He tried eating his breakfast at his desk, but couldn’t swallow a bite.

A whiff of Gokul Santol talcum powder invaded his senses. Kaivalya... She leaned on his desk and raised an eyebrow.

“What happened? Are you all right?” she asked, her voice rich, mellifluous and entrancing.

“Nothing,” Ranga mumbled.

“We got a colour TV. But the reception is bad. We get Chennai DD1,” she said and went on and on as usual without waiting for him to respond.

Gaja always said that ‘She wants you’. Why not! With legs so smooth, who wouldn’t? Ranga thought.

Kaivalya snapped her fingers and said, “Hello? Dreaming? Are you even paying attention to what I am saying?”

He loved the way those dimples formed on her face when she smiled. And her big, brown eyes were always filled with wondrous jest.

“I am! I was just wondering about the quarterly results,” Ranga said.

Joel walked in and spotted Kaivalya talking to Ranga and walked straight to them.

“Hi, K!” Joel greeted Kaivalya. She mumbled a greeting in return and walked away to her desk. Ranga was happy.

“Listen One-by-two, before you even think of making a move on her, get yourself real pants,” Joel said and hit Ranga on his head.

Ranga swallowed the insult and focused on the floor. He was on the verge of tears but didn’t want to cry. So he bit his lip and held back. It was one thing when Joel was out of earshot, you could call him all the names you wanted to. There were days when Ranga wondered, What will he do if I stood up to him? Hit me again? He does it anyway! But he never mustered the courage. What made it worse was that he was insulted in front of Kaivalya.

Their English teacher Nagaraj walked in. He was a sagely man who had served the school for close to 20 years. The grapevine had it that he was going to retire by the end of 1987. His vast forehead was smeared with ash and the bright red dot of vermilion at its center offered wonderful contrast. Nagaraj smiled at the class and put his spectacles on before he started his lecture.

Nagaraj started where he had left off in the previous class before the holidays: Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. Ranga wasn’t paying attention, wallowing in self-pity, when Nagaraj’s voice startled him.

“Ranga, can you pronounce this word and tell the class what it means?” Nagaraj asked and wrote the word ‘Unique’ on the board. Before Ranga could open his mouth, Joel shouted from the back row.

“Sir, can I answer that one?”

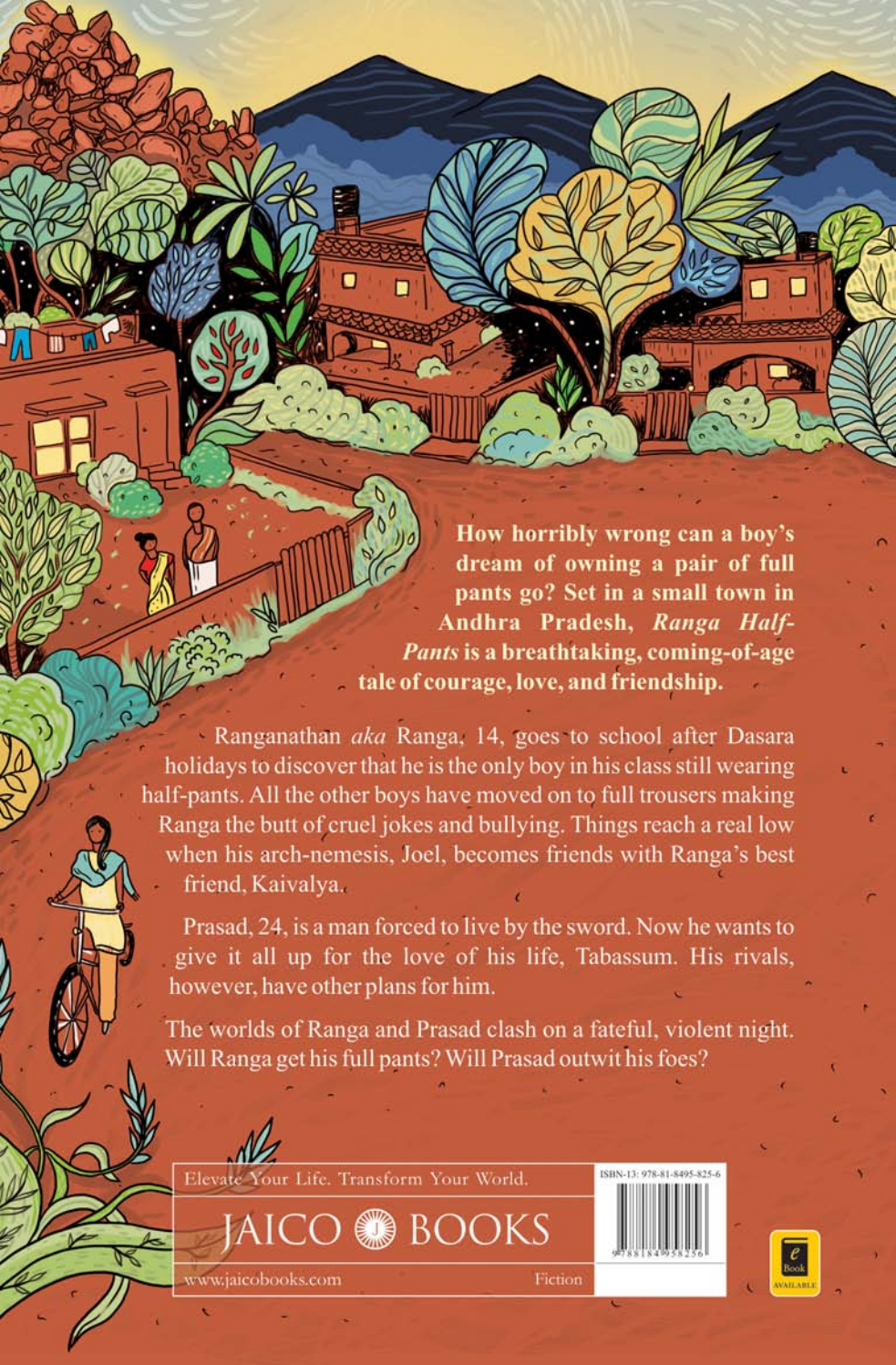
“Go for it,” the teacher said.

“‘Unique’ means something that’s special and one of its kind...” Joel looked around. His gaze rested on Kaivalya for a little while. He continued, “For example, Ranga is unique.”

Ranga knew exactly what was coming up. He sank in his seat. He wanted to kill Joel. Slowly. By inflicting maximum, sustained pain.

“Ranga is the only one who wears half-pants! UNIQUE!”

The class exploded in laughter.



How horribly wrong can a boy's dream of owning a pair of full pants go? Set in a small town in Andhra Pradesh, *Ranga Half-Pants* is a breathtaking, coming-of-age tale of courage, love, and friendship.

Ranganathan *aka* Ranga, 14, goes to school after Dasara holidays to discover that he is the only boy in his class still wearing half-pants. All the other boys have moved on to full trousers making Ranga the butt of cruel jokes and bullying. Things reach a real low when his arch-nemesis, Joel, becomes friends with Ranga's best friend, Kaivalya.

Prasad, 24, is a man forced to live by the sword. Now he wants to give it all up for the love of his life, Tabassum. His rivals, however, have other plans for him.

The worlds of Ranga and Prasad clash on a fateful, violent night. Will Ranga get his full pants? Will Prasad outwit his foes?

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