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R A N G R U T

(The Recruit)

by

B a r e n B a s u

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FIVE RUPEES

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GLOSSARY

- adda*: Place where cronies gather
- annaprasana*: the ceremonial giving to an infant of its first solid food, generally when it becomes six months old
- Bibhishan*: a character from the *Ramayana*, Ram's fifth columnist
- bidis*: cigarettes in which the tobacco is rolled in a type of leaf and fastened with thread
- boudi*: elder brother's wife
- burra khana*: big feast
- chapati*: unleavened bread
- dada*: elder brother
- dal*: lentil soup
- durwan*: watchman, gatekeeper
- ganja*: intoxicant drug
- gopinis*: damsels who used to dance with Lord Krishna
- gora phaltan*: white army
- gosakhana*: sulking chamber
- gur*: crude, brown sugar
- havildar*: sergeant
- jawan*: youth, commonly used for soldiers
- khitchri*: rice and pulses cooked together
- Khuda*: God
- lapshi*: gruel
- Maharaj Pandu*: A character in the *Mahabharatha*, father of the Pandavas; he was supposed to be impotent and allowed his queen to bear the children of three different gods
- mairie*: a popular Calcutta swear word; said to have originated from the English 'By Mary' or the Portuguese equivalent

mora: a small bamboo or cane stool

maik: corporal; lance-naik: lance-corporal

ostagar: tailor

pan: betel leaves, commonly chewed after food

puri: unleavened bread

ram raj: the rule of Ram, a golden age

sabash: well done

sala: a common form of abuse, originally meaning 'wife's brother'; now often used in parts of the country in familiar conversation, in most cases without any abusive connotation

sardar: leader, headman, chief

shamiana: tent, pavilion

'*Telegraph*': the name given by Calcutta newsboys to the evening newspaper; hence, *Telegraphwalla*: seller of 'Telegraphs'

NOTE

Translation of Hindi verses on p. 33:

Come, O recruit,
At home you get dry bread,
In the Army you will get fruit,
Come, O recruit.

** ** **

Come, O recruit,
At home you get torn clothes,
In the Army you will get a suit,
Come, O recruit.



1

"Moscow has fallen....Hitler has taken Moscow...."

From the moving bus the passengers shouted, "Hi....
Telegraphwallah, come here...."

The bus stopped at the corner of Bowbazar Street. The newsboys literally surrounded it. The conductor rang the bell for the bus to start. The newsboys rushed towards a tramcar. Some jumped as they shouted, "Moscow has fallenHitler is coming to India...."

Two of the passengers in the bus had bought the evening paper. It was difficult to read under the shaded light. But who cared! The men who sat near them crowded round to catch a glimpse of the headlines. One of them said in an authoritative tone, "Well, sir, how long can these uncultured rustics hold on? They wanted to fight against the Germans, just imagine! Moscow has fallen and that means that the road to India is now open...."

"I wish they would come sooner, brother. How long can one go on living like a blind bull going round and round the oil-press? Let Hitler come and then we shall see who protects the *salas*."

"You are right, brother. Indeed, how strong the rascals are! They cannot save their own country and they are going to defend India? As if nobody can see them if they dig slit-trenches and sit tight in them in the black-out. I hear that London has been levelled out like the wide fields round our fort...."

"Oh, don't you know, our boss had booked his passage some three months back. Today I had to go and get a refund. Poor fellow, he has no 'home' to go back to."

From the corner of the bus, where it was the darkest, an elderly gentleman asked, "Has Moscow really fallen, sir?"

Someone jeered, "How does it affect you? Tell me, sir, 'who is pulling a ladder through your ripe corn?'"

"Well, it does affect me somewhat," replied the elderly gentleman. "I would have had no objection at all if the defeat of Russia and the coming of Hitler here could have brought us freedom. But how can you forget that Hitler is only a cousin of the British and no friend of ours...."

There seemed to be an ebb in the tide of joy over Hitler's victories. Some threw disgusted glances at the elderly gentleman and turned their faces away. Some began to light up their *bidis*.

It was the corner of Wellington Square. Amal had to get off here. Before leaving he looked well into the calm and grave face of the elderly gentleman. Jumping off the bus he walked towards the public urinal and stopped dead as he saw two long queues. This was something new in their lives introduced by the war. One had to queue up for everything. He was not in a position to wait till his turn came. Amal thought that it would be better to do it in the open field. Thanks to the black-out nobody would be able to see him.

The boxing stadium stood on the eastern side of Wellington Square. Two men were practising under the shaded light. Amal stopped. He loved to watch boxing. Once upon a time he had wanted to learn the art. But what would he have gained? Boxing was no additional qualification for one looking for a job.

Amal began to walk again. He entered the park through the western gate. In the blacked-out night, under the shaded lights, the park looked like a maze. Amal looked around him and sat down on his haunches to make water. As he was getting up he heard a tinkle of bangles. With his ears alert he peered into the darkness. A short distance away he saw two figures very close to one another. He wondered who they could be. Were they husband and wife? If so, why should they come to make love in the park? They clung to one another in close embrace. Amal wanted to stay and look on for some time more. Yet he felt uncomfortable standing there like a greedy person. He thought that it would be best to sit down. He had to go to a wedding party. It would not matter if he were late by an hour. It was not an interview for a job.

After walking a short distance he was going to sit down. Suddenly the girl got up and walked fast towards the gate. A man in European clothes followed, trying to catch up with her. Amal felt repentant. Was he responsible for the

disturbance? He had no reason to sit down now. As he walked along unmindfully, he thought that he could have as well got married. If Samiran could get married why could not he? A bitter smile played across his lips. How could an unemployed person get married?

There was an orchard covered with a *shamiana* in the house where the wedding was taking place. In the midst of it was a throne covered with velvet cloth. The orchard had been gaily decorated with artificial trees, creepers, hills and rivers, the moon and stars and what not. Amal thought that Samiran must have looked like a king or something of that sort sitting on that throne.

The guests sat in front of the orchard. The place had been surrounded by a wall of double tarpaulins to prevent the light being seen from outside. A number of electric fans whirled away. Yet the stifling heat made one feel uncomfortable. There were different types of invited guests. One could make out their importance from the way they were received. The guests had divided themselves into groups and were engaged in fierce arguments.

Amal listened intently. "Moscow fell long ago. Do you think they give us any news these days? If they give us the real news there will be a revolution here."

Amal suddenly recalled the words of that elderly gentleman in the bus. He turned away and sat down elsewhere. Here some people were discussing something in a low voice. "This is the right time, sir," said one, "to hold on to razor blades. The more you can get hold of, the more profits you can get..."

"Are there any blades in the market now?" asked another. "They all seem to have vanished long ago."

"Then you had better take on a Government contract.... You will be a rich man in no time. This war is not going to end soon. This is the opportunity, sir."

Samiran's younger brother discovered Amal and dragged him into a room. "Hello.... Why are you so late?" asked Samiran. "I am thoroughly upset...."

Amal looked at Samiran's face covered with beads of sandal-wood paste and said, "Why are you sitting in the corner of this room? I saw your throne standing empty outside."

"Oh, don't talk about that, brother," said Samiran. "They really used force. They insisted that I should sit inside that show-case. What awful taste! Don't you see, it is all black-market money. So they don't care for money."

"However that may be, you would have looked like a king or something of that sort."

"You seem to have developed a desire for all this. Why don't you change places with me?"

"What are you talking about? Change places with an unemployed loafer like me? Then they will have to order a cage instead of a throne."

A girl of about twelve, all wrapped up in a heavy Banarasi saree, handed Amal a cup of tea. Taking the cup from her hands Amal asked Samiran, "Is she your sister-in-law?"

The girl gave Amal a glance from the corner of her eyes and ran away.

"Yes, she must be something of that sort," said Samiran. "They are constantly teasing me. I can't understand from where they have gathered all this fund of humour."

"And outside," said Amal, "I saw the same expression of overflowing happiness. A war has broken out and that seems to have opened out new opportunities for them."

Samiran leaned over Amal's shoulders. "Oh, leave them alone. Have you managed to get a job as yet?"

"No," said Amal. "Where can I get a job? I am only roaming about the streets in vain."

Samiran's face wore a sad look. "How are you going to carry on in these days of war?" He stared at Amal for some time and continued, "Well, what else can you do? You had better get into some job connected with the war."

"By a war-job do you mean the ARP?"

"In that you will only lower your status...."

"Then, Government contract?"

"Well, anything that you can get."

"No. I do not want to help the Government in any way in connection with the war."

"Forget all those moral scruples." Samiran spoke in a sharp tone. "Can you exist in this world today with these principles of yours? Don't you see how everything is being wrecked by this war? Many free countries are losing their independence. In this mad rush for evacuation practically everyone has sold his wife's jewellery and run away from Calcutta. Lakhs of educated boys like you have joined the army. What else can you do different from these? We have also started taking military contracts...."

The wedding was over. Amal had his dinner and thought it was time he left. But it would be wrong not to visit Samiran once in the bridal chamber. As he came in front of the room Samiran called him loudly, probably to show how smart he was. As Amal sat down by his side Samiran introduced his friend to his bride in the proper fashion. The bride raised her folded palms to her forehead in salutation. The rows of bangles on her wrist jingled. Amal recalled Samiran's words, "It is all black-market money, so they don't care for money."

Amal greeted her in turn, but he did not know what to say to her. He tried to speak once or twice and then remained silent. Samiran sidled up to him and whispered, "I don't think you will be able to manage business properly, Amal. It is better that you should join the army. You never know, you might get a good chance."

Amal stood up. "Let us see what happens. I'll be going now. It is rather late." As he went to bid the bride goodbye he saw her stare at him. Silently he saluted her with folded palms and left.

Amal walked fast for no reason. Entering the park he stopped for a moment. He cast his eyes over the whole field and then began to walk again, but slowly. The collyrium-touched eyes of the bride seemed to hover before his eyes. He wondered why she had stared at him like that.

But why did Samiran suggest that he should enter the army? Perhaps what he meant was that he had no other way but to link his life up with this war. But why? Why was there no other way? What connection had he with this war? This was a war between the British and the Germans and the Japs. What interest could enslaved Indians have in it?

But Samiran also said that they themselves had started taking military contracts. Samiran's father-in-law had made so much money in the black-market that money was of no consequence to him. Samiran's father did not hesitate to establish relations with such a person. But to be friendly with one who takes military contracts and operates in the black-market is to help the British. Probably that is why Samiran suggested so calmly that he should join the army.

There was not a soul at the corner of Wellington Square. The tramcars had stopped running long ago. Buses were coming at irregular intervals. Under the black-out shades the lonely, silent street looked ghostly. The huge posters on the walls seemed to be winking. With doubting eyes Amal stared at the poster calling on the people to "Join the Indian Army". He had seen this poster many times. But today he looked at it with a new understanding. The man in the picture seemed very familiar. The whispered words of Samiran knocked at his ears, "Lakhs of educated boys like you are joining the army. What else can you do different from these?"

Standing there all alone Amal somehow felt afraid. He walked towards Esplanade. Now and then a taxi rushed past carrying a crowd of drunken Anglo-Indian men and women. The head of a drunken man in a rickshaw rolled to one side. The darkness seemed to crouch at the street corners.

The pointers to the ARP centres seemed to block the way. Some beast of prey seemed to be prowling behind the baffle walls. On the steps of the Salvation Army Headquarters a young man gave his girl a smacking kiss. As he reached the corner of Free School Street a man stealthily crept up to Amal and said in a muffled voice, "Young girl, Babu.... Anglo-Indian...." It seemed to Amal that it was this man who sold *Paris Pictures* in front of Whiteaway's in the afternoon.

* * *

Amal's was a small family, but its income was smaller still. Hence at every step they had to struggle for existence against want and poverty. Amal's father was poor, but refused to recognise the fact. He was a landlord by birth. For a long time he had administered his estates. Even now the temper of a landlord peeped from behind the torn *dhoti* and the patched up shirt. Family pride and traditions had become his only capital.

The landed property had dwindled away. What remained were the trappings of past glory. There was no income from the estates, but one still had to bear the expenses of frequent law-suits. The boys witnessed the vain attempts to maintain the old aristocratic traditions with patches here and there and listened to the pleasant stories of the days of the indomitable power of the landlord.

Nanigopal Babu had three sons and two daughters. His wife was dead. His mother was still alive. The eldest son had failed to jump the hurdle of the Matriculation examination and was employed in a merchantile firm on a pay of thirty rupees a month. Amal, the second son, was intelligent. He had not been allowed to take a job after he passed the Intermediate examination. In the hope of rebuilding his ruined family fortune Nanigopal Babu had placed great hopes on Amal. He staked his reputation and money on him. If Amal could be a graduate the prestige of his family would increase. More, he would get a better-paid job because of his higher education. As far as the youngest son Kamal was concerned, Nanigopal Babu took no risks, but sent him straight to a commercial school to prepare him for the life of a clerk.

Bimal's income was not enough to maintain the family. Nanigopal Babu had to beg and borrow in secret from his rich relatives. Amal was now his only hope. If he could bring in at least a hundred rupees every month the bet would be won. He would be freed from the necessity of begging and borrowing. Then when Kamal would begin to earn

something he could think of resurrecting his lost heritage. As a father Nanigopal Babu had certainly every right to cherish such hopes.

But the wretched war came in the way. The fear of bombing raids emptied Calcutta. From the street-beggars to the rich, everyone left the city with whatever he could take with him. Nanigopal Babu's family faced a crisis. Most of the rich relatives had left Calcutta. Hence that portion of the income was lost. On the other hand, prices continued to rise every day. It was no longer just difficult to make both ends meet, it really became impossible. Three months had passed since Amal had graduated. Leave alone getting a proper job, he was unable to give more than twenty to twenty-five rupees a month towards family expenses. Thanks to the evacuation his two pupils had left Calcutta and he had no income at all.

One morning Amal sat down early for his mid-day meal. He was going out somewhere with his friends. As she placed a plate of rice in front of him his grandmother said, "I say, Ome, don't you intend taking a job? You have passed three examinations. You are no fool, you should understand everything."

"What are you talking of passing three examinations, grandma?" said Amal. "Even those who have passed a dozen examinations are roaming about the streets. One does not get a job simply because one needs it. I am trying. I shall start working as soon as I get a job."

Nanigopal Babu had been listening to the conversation from somewhere nearby. When he heard Amal's reply he rushed out and faced him. "How can one get a job by loafing about without any care? You are having a good time sitting at home in comfort and eating your fill. Aren't you ashamed of yourself? And I have to go begging from door to door. Such luxurious living will not be tolerated any longer. From now on instead of rice you will have ashes to eat." He rushed back into his room and sat down in grim silence.

Amal had noticed for some time that Grandma spoke to him sharply. Again and again she referred to the question of getting a job and sharply hinted that he was indifferent. Mini and Rini had tried to speak to him a number of times. So the incident that morning was not unconnected with the small things that he had noticed.

Amal stopped eating. His eyes were smarting. He bit his lips hard. As he was getting up Grandma caught hold of his hands. "Eat my head, but you can't leave your food

like that. Goddess Lakshmi will be annoyed. One should not take offence at what one's father says."

Amal quietly finished his meals. Having dressed up quickly, as he made to leave the house, Mini rushed up to him with betel nuts. "Don't be angry, second-brother," she said. "Father is not at all well these days. And then, it is so difficult to make both ends meet...."

Amal gave no reply. He tossed the betel nuts into his mouth. Looking at Mini for some time, his thoughts protested. Has he not been trying to get a job? During the last three months he had knocked his head against every vacancy announced in the 'Situations Vacant' columns of *The Statesman*. And yet he had failed to get a job. He had no peg to cling to. The rich relatives could help you with ten or twenty rupees now and then, but it was beneath their dignity to use their influence to place him somewhere.

As he stepped out on to the street Amal felt that he could not come back home again. How could he return home after all this without securing a job? But this was a kind of tyranny. He had nothing to call his own and yet this great responsibility had been thrust on his shoulders. If he failed to earn something so many people would die without food.

The sun was hot. The tar on the streets had begun to melt. Amal walked fast. Perspiration streamed down his limbs. He went straight to Samiran's house. As soon as Samiran came out, Amal asked him, "I say, could you tell me where to go to get a job in the army, since it's your suggestion? Have I to pull any wires?"

"Come on inside," said Samiran, "and sit down for a while. The very thought of joining the army seems to have given a military edge to your temper."

Amal and Samiran went inside the house. Samiran put the fan on. "So you have decided to join the army?" he asked Amal.

The cool breeze from the fan seemed to make Amal wilder still. He felt that this was the worst mockery, just like Grandma's affection. For some time he sat there with a glum face. "So you have made up your mind?" Samiran asked again.

Amal seemed to burst out. "What is there to make up one's mind about? I am being dragged into it by the scruff of my neck. What am I to do? Thanks to the war you are taking government contracts, operating in the black-market. These are good days for you. But what about people like us?"

When Amal came out on the street after getting the address of the recruiting office he felt thoroughly depressed. Upto now he had thought that like all other jobs he would

have to get help from people who had influence, he would have to pull a number of strings. And then he would not get the job. And he would be saved. But all these efforts were not at all necessary to join the army. You could get a job just for the asking.

Amal still walked about the streets, went round to a few places for the last time. There was no change in the situation. Everywhere the "No Vacancy" boards hung on the doors with insolent arrogance. On the walls of the offices hung that same poster, "Join the Indian Army."

At last Amal came back to that resting place of the unemployed, the Curzon Park. Protecting himself from the slanting rays of a declining sun he sat down at the foot of a tree. Many more people like him were hanging about there. They were all unemployed young men. They had no right to stay at home during the day. If they did, their parents would suspect that they wanted to sit at home in comfort and eat their fill.

Amal looked around him and then stretched himself out under the tree. By now all his excitement had died down. There was nothing more he could do. He would have to return home again. The very thought of going back home made him shudder with fear.

A couple of yards away from him sat two boys talking. Suddenly one of them slapped the earth with his hands and said, "Of course, I will join the army...."

"To join the army now," said the other, "when the country is facing such a crisis is to act like a traitor...."

"But tell me what are you doing? Individual satyagraha! If you talk of betrayal, it is you who have first started it. You are playing with the lives of poor people like us and begging at the doors of the Viceroy's palace. What a wonderful fight for freedom! Why can't you give a call for revolution? Destroy British rule and then we will resist the Japs ourselves...."

"No, no. This is no time to lose one's head. We cannot take the road to violence."

"Of course, you can't. Then all your tricks will be found out. Look, don't repeat empty phrases like 'my country'. If we cannot live, for whom will the country be free? Do you know how many lakhs of people like me have already joined the army?"

"They have made a mistake...."

"Will your country become free only if these people die a slow death? Look here, if you want to liberate the country you have to give up this begging and really fight like men."

If you really start such a fight, one day you will see that we are no less patriotic than anybody else."

Amal stared at the speaker for some time. He felt that now he could go back home without any worries.

* * *

Amal had thought that all those who loaf about Clive Street would be crowding round the Recruiting Office. He was a bit worried when he saw that the crowd was not up to his expectations. He wondered whether he had really made a mistake.

A rather smart boy said, "There is no dearth of recruiting offices. On Mayo Road are the Supplies and Ordnance Centres; on Theatre Road are the Hospitals and the Pioneers. But there is no prospect there. Here they are recruiting men for work on the railways. This is a technical line. This is better for educated people."

"That is why," said another, "we see a crowd of gentlemen here."

"Naturally. If you have some education why should you become a soldier only to dig the earth? For such people there are recruiting centres in every bye-lane."

Now Amal could grasp the situation. So this was not the only Recruiting Centre. There were many more scattered all over the place like traps. He got back sufficient equanimity to study the crowd around. The number was not too small. There were at least sixty to seventy people. There were different types of men gossiping in small groups. Together they formed quite a crowd.

The most busy and talkative group was composed of men dressed in European clothes. A shirt and a pair of trousers are supposed to make one look smart. Tucking their shirts inside some sort of trousers they strutted about the place. Cigarettes hung from the lips of most of them. Their conversation was heavily loaded with such expressions as "sala" and "mairie". They had studied up to the sixth or seventh standard, but called themselves, "non-Matrices". They had come here to put back for at least another generation the inevitable destiny of becoming either a worker in the factory or an office peon or orderly.

There was another group who still seemed to retain some remnant of the odour of aristocracy. The clothes they wore were their own. The shoes ranged from the Oxford type to slippers of the *Vidyasagar* pattern. Most of their parents still earned from a hundred to two hundred rupees a month. They were the sons of lawyers, physicians, barristers, petty

officials, small businessmen and the like. Among them were matriculates and even a few graduates like Amal. The war had really pushed them into a tight corner and they were probably worse off than the rest. It had become practically impossible for them to retain any longer their air of respectability by hiding their frayed shirts underneath fancy coats. They had lost the taste for working out a budget for life in the hope of winning a lottery. So here they had come in search of a fortune or to make good in life. In the whole crowd they were the ones who felt most uncomfortable, just like those girls who push their way into a bus but cannot stand a man sitting next to them.

The rest belonged to the lowest rung of society. They could not afford clean, laundered clothes. Many of them had no shoes even. Among them were pedlars, rickshaw pullers, coachmen, hotel boys, pimps and even a few pick-pockets. Some of them sat on the floor in complete indifference; some listened to the conversation of the gentlemen with great interest. Others carefully opened the swing-door of the office now and then and peeped inside.

Many were disgusted with standing for such a long time in the crowd. They had finished smoking a couple of *bidis*. Their throats were irritated. One of the educated type went away in disgust. He said that he had just come to see the fun. One jeered at him, "What hole will you go to? You will have to come here again tomorrow. You will go home and see only rats playing inside your empty pots and pans."

"We may have come because we are starving," said someone else, "but these *salas* should be conscious of their responsibility of defending their empire. Then why play about with us? Just see the long list of things they are doing. It takes one day to enter your name, another for the medical examination and today we have to sign a bond."

"Sign a bond? What for?"

"Who knows?"

A clerk stepped out of the office. He yelled a great deal and sorted the men out into three groups. In the first group were those who had finished their medical examination, in the second those who had to go for medical examination and in the third the newcomers. Members of each group now began to talk among themselves. Some began to light *bidis* again with fresh enthusiasm.

Two men were talking. "What will be your pay?"

"At the moment they will give me twentyone rupees. I shall learn a fireman's job. If I pass my examination I shall get a raise of another five rupees. Then they say the pay will just go on increasing, till it reaches two hundred or three