

ZAC O'YEAH

## LOOKING FOR MALGUDI

“In your view, perhaps, you think that in an Indian street, you can see bearded men floating about in a state of levitation. Far from it. We have traffic, crowds, shops, pimps, pickpockets, policemen and what not as in any other country.”

—R. K. Narayan, “Reluctant Guru” (1974)

BANGALORE HAS AN ENDLESS OUTER RING ROAD. Cars that appear like speed-addicted oversized cockroaches on growth hormones, horny and honking lorries, and buses resembling pregnant dinosaurs whiz past. The noise is deafening as I—the only fool on foot—share the “pedestrian space” with the occasional murderous scooter taking a shortcut through the wrong lane, dodging their exhaust and dust tails.

Incidentally, the city’s roads are home to an astonishing 10 million vehicles, including 7 million two-wheelers, about 1.5 million three-wheelers, and over 2 million four-wheelers, with another 1,250 being added daily at the rate of one per minute, altogether causing, on average, nearly 200 pedestrian deaths per year. I count myself lucky that there are a few inches of space for people who walk, as I’m reminded of an oft-shared joke: “In India we drive on the left of the road. In Bangalore, we drive on what is left of the road.”

However, I’m not actually surveying the vehicular mess but only strolling through Doddanekundi, once a probably charming village by a pond of the same name 20 kilometres outside the town centre. The name of the locality is generally interpreted as “jungle full of jackals,” but now the flora and fauna have been swallowed up by the ever-growing city, and it’s just one more suburb dotted with malls and drive-in restaurants. Curiously enough, despite everything pointing to the opposite, Doddanekundi is nowadays best known for its bicycling culture, with cyclist clubs and the city’s first cycling lanes laid out between its IT parks, to “tackle vehicular congestion

by incentivising non-motorised travel and promote shorter non-motorised urban commutes” according to an article.

My quest is beginning to seem absurd before it’s properly begun. I’m looking for Malgudi, that gentlest of places characterized by a completely different pace of life—quaint bungalows and cheerful bazaars populated by astrologers, printing presses, painters of signs, and talkative men. If one googles this fiction created by renowned Indian writer R. K. Narayan 90 years ago, a quick search throws up several modern candidates in present-day India. One Malgudi is a gated community south of Chennai (“inspired by RK Narayan’s ideological concept”), another is a pharmacy near Mysore University, a third is a café called Malgudi Junction in Kolkata, and then there’s a Malgudi restaurant on Bangalore’s outskirts. The latter is said to offer a special “Malgudi menu,” which is why I’m searching for it.

After two kilometres of survival exercise on the Ring Road, the restaurant appears before me like a hallucination. Built to resemble a traditional home with wooden pillars, it has a swing on the porch, a tray of help-yourself bananas by the door, and walls covered with reproductions of drawings by Narayan’s brother, the illustrator R. K. Laxman. Aunties in *saris* demolish huge *thali* meals, sinking their hands into veritable culinary landscapes consisting of mountains of rice and oceans of *sambar*, and soft-spoken software techies tank up on non-veg with beers . . . Non-veg? Beers?

As I peruse the menu, I wonder what Narayan would have ordered. The Malgudi section is a mishmash of southern appetizers, such as chicken-65 (supposedly invented in Chennai in 1965), chicken-95 (invented, well, thirty years later I presume), and Malgudi spl. chicken, but much as I’ve internalized his novels I can only recall two chickens ever being cooked, and neither was considered edible. Once chicken *pullao* is suspected to be a murder weapon, and another time chicken is declared outright disgusting.<sup>1</sup> After all, Narayan was a vegetarian.

I flip to the Tamil section. Narayan was from that side of the border, and he later returned to Chennai, where I was fortunate enough to be invited home by him in the late 1990s. He had stopped giving formal interviews and was unwilling to answer the same questions about Malgudi’s symbolic meaning, but within short my nervousness evaporated, as it turned out that he preferred to discuss Tamil food habits, which interested me too.

Considering that it is rumoured he was twice fielded as India’s candidate for the world’s highest literary award, I just had to sneak in the question

of whether he hoped ever to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. Counted among the world's great writers, often mentioned in the same breath as Honoré de Balzac, Anton Chekhov, Charles Dickens, William Faulkner, and Nikolai Gogol, his many admirers comprised the likes of E. M. Forster, Graham Greene, Somerset Maugham, and even the exigent V. S. Naipaul—but, being Naipaul, with reservations. In *An Area of Darkness* (1964) the latter noted that the “virtues of R. K. Narayan are Indian failings magically transmuted. I say this without disrespect: he is a writer whose work I admire and enjoy.” Essentially, Naipaul's grievance was that Narayan's fictional India hadn't prepared him for the factual India that severely culture-shocked him during his first visit to the country of his ancestors, suggesting that his own shock was made worse by the illusions that Malgudi had impressed on his mind.

“No, I don't need a Nobel Prize. What would I do with it?” he said and quickly changed the topic, “So exactly which south Indian dishes have you eaten?”

I named all that had found favour with me, and he appeared pleased that I enjoyed both *dosa* and *idli* because dishes like these couldn't be had in Europe: “The temperature wouldn't allow a proper fermentation.” A Tamilian would know. The constantly warm climate—Chennai's seasons are sometimes only slightly jestingly characterized as hot, hotter, and hottest—was used for great effect in creating fermented goodies. (Later, I learned from a chef in the UK that it usually takes at least thirty hours to ferment *dosa* batter in London, even in summer.) The less we talked about fiction, the more communicative he became, so we chatted about basically anything but writing. Now and then the grand master of Indian literature inspected his potted plants with a critical eye, but he seemed to be entirely unsentimental when declaring that some of them did not seem to be particularly alive, for that is the course of nature.

“I think that all things, humans included, go through a phase of decay towards the end. So this is entirely natural, all this,” he said, alluding to his own aged body and the fact that he had stopped giving interviews about his books, only then to ask with comradely pleasure, as one writer might of another, “Would you like to see my study?”

It was at this moment that I think he realized how much our meeting meant to me, and it was this moment that I later felt the greatest gratitude for. With the support of a crutch he made his way through the apartment he

shared with his nephew over to a chamber where he kept a cot and a writing desk. He sat down to sign a copy of his autobiography for me and then rested his hand on a pile of papers.

“Are you writing something at the moment,” I asked.

“No, this is my correspondence. Every now and then I have a typist write out letters for me, but mostly I let the mail lie here and go through a phase of decay. It’s like a natural process. I imagine that if I wait long enough, these will disappear.” He then asked me to write to him sometime, as he enjoyed receiving letters. But he added, “If you don’t get a reply, you’ll know why.”

In case you are wondering, I did post a letter and never heard back, but our conversation about food stuck in my mind, so Tamil grub it is. Sandwiched between the non-veg offerings there’s a short list of veg, and I do the usual travel writer thing and order what I’ve never heard of before, hoping for an exciting discovery. The *munakai* soup is a light curry-ish preparation, and I can imagine it being eaten in Malgudi. Their *varthalkuzhambu*—supposedly one of the most classic Tamil dishes—turns out to be over-spiced garlic pods pickled in salt—a bitter and sour assault on the bowels. Narayan may have opted for the standard meals, which seem to be a big draw.

As I empty my plantain leaf, I’m even more determined to find the real deal—the actual Malgudi. There are clues.

Internet sources useful for various degrees of disinformation situate Malgudi near Coimbatore (from where Narayan’s wife hailed and where his daughter later settled after marrying). In Tamil Nadu there are in fact several candidates, such as Lalgudi, roughly 100 kilometres from Rasipuram, which is what the initial R. in R. K. Narayan’s name stands for. The town of Mangudi has an even more deceptively similar name. But what if it’s in the state of Karnataka instead? I’ve found evidence for such a notion in the Doordarshan series *Malgudi Days* (1986-2006) by playing the video in slow motion. Do you recall the episode about the mailman who doesn’t deliver an inauspicious letter on a wedding day? The footage of the post office flashes the zip code 577 411 in passing. It happens to belong to a small Malnad town called Agumbe with a population of 180 joint families. Malnad . . . Agu . . . Malgu . . . umbe? It’s a 50% match.

His cinematic adaptations give hints. When Narayan scripted his first and only feature for the silver screen—the now lost Tamil low-budget satire *Miss Malini* (1947)—it was shot in Chennai and portrayed life in that town. But when he rewrote this screenplay into the novel *Mr. Sampath—The*

*Printer of Malgudi* (1949), the plot obviously moved from Chennai to his imagined Malgudi. This book was then adapted into the Hindi movie *Mr. Sampat* (1952), and it was again a Gemini production filmed in their Chennai studios. Despite the Hindi-speaking characters, its sets look distinctly south Indian, such as the vegetarian Hanuman Vilas Hotel—an archetypal café scene that can still be experienced, for example, in the older neighbourhoods of Bangalore. By the time his novel *The Financial Expert* (1952) was “adopted” [sic] into Kannada as *Banker Margayya* (1983), it seems that Malgudi had finally been located in geography, as far as I can tell in Karnataka’s hilly Malnad region. Watching the movie, I spot the name Koppa on a signboard—a town some 30 kilometres away from the hill station Agumbe. Another clue that firmly settles matters came when Malgudi made its biggest-budget appearance in the award-winning Dev Anand-starrer *The Guide* (1965). Despite its awards and box office success, Narayan preferred the humbler small screen televised version simply because the Bollywood version was shot in Rajasthan and Gujarat, which didn’t fit Narayan’s own image of Malgudi at all. “They had discarded my own values in milieu and human characteristics,” he lamented in *My Days: An Autobiography* (1974). But he felt that Shankar Nag’s acclaimed *Malgudi Days*, largely shot in Agumbe, really did justice to Malgudi.

A clear lead, if ever there was one, but before leaving the metropolis it must be pointed out that Bangalore isn’t entirely irrelevant in the search for Malgudi, for it was here that Narayan came up with the name. It happened on Vijayadashmi Day in September 1930, when he began writing his first novel, *Swami and Friends* (1935). Narayan had recently graduated but was unemployed. Staying with his grandmother in the big city, he waited for his future to somehow reveal itself, loafing about in the streets, planning, and then buying an exercise book in which to write his novel. “As I sat in a room nibbling at my pen and wondering what to write, Malgudi with its little railway station swam into view, all ready-made, with a character called Swaminathan running down the platform.” The station had a banyan tree, a stationmaster, and two trains a day—one coming and one going.

Once, when interviewed by *Frontline* magazine, he clarified that “what happened was I was thinking of a name for the railway station. It should have a name-board. And I didn’t want to have an actual name which could be found in a railway timetable. I wanted to avoid that, because some busybody was likely to say, ‘This place is not there, that shop he has mentioned

is not there.' If it's a real town it's a nuisance for a writer. And while I was worrying about this problem, the idea came to me—Malgudi just seemed to hurl into view. It has no meaning."

Day by day, as one page followed another, a place so endearing and enduring was built that it caught the imagination of the entire world, and it has been variously compared to Gabriel García Márquez's "Macondo," Thomas Hardy's "Wessex," and Faulkner's "Yoknapatawpha County." Greene, who became Narayan's champion, sounding board, story consultant, editor, proofreader, and agent rolled into one, wrote of Malgudi, "with which for nearly twenty years we have been as familiar as with our own birthplace," that he imagined himself walking on "those loved and shabby streets" and meeting strangers who "open a door on to yet another human existence." Over the years, the fictional place has been given a wide range of interpretations. For example, Pankaj Mishra, in *Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English* (2003), calls it "the new world of urbanising India," while a paper titled "The City of Malgudi as an Expression of the Ordered Hindu Cosmos," presented by Dr. James Fennelly at the American Academy of Religion, explores its spiritual aspects as a Mecca of sorts. As you may have guessed, there is a full-fledged academic field known as "Narayan Studies" that attracts scholars to seminars with titles like "Malgudisation of Reality." Even as Narayan made sure to give his town a fictitious name so as to be free to meddle with its geography and details, the city-based historian Ramachandra Guha tells me: "The folklore, which may or may not be correct, is that Malgudi is taken from MAL-leswaram and Basavan-GUDI"—two prominent older neighbourhoods in town. And considering that of the two, Malleswaram has a significant Tamilian presence, it does seem the likeliest candidate.<sup>2</sup>

I haven't managed to pinpoint the exact room or desk where Narayan had his seismic brainwave, but it must have been in Malleswaram, which, in Narayan's own words, was a highly agreeable new extension to the city: "Though created in 1898 [it] is still growing. Here residential buildings are cropping up almost overnight and going on to the very edge of Yesvantpur, which is the next station on the railway. If anyone wants to select a pattern for a house, which is simple and healthy and capable of shutting out the burglar but not light or air, he will do well to walk along some of the cross roads in Malleswaram . . ." It was an absolutely wonderful place at the time he self-published his travelogue *Mysore* (1944)—"I have seen few sights anywhere

to compare with the loveliness of Margosa Avenue in Malleswaram”—and furthermore, Malleswaram has a small railway station. It was utterly quaint, according to those who remember the original building, and it probably inspired the initial scene Narayan wrote on that September day. So I suspect it wouldn't be far off the mark if one supposed that his writing chamber was within sight of the station building? In the completed book the station scene features at the end as the backdrop to the climax when his friend goes away on a train and leaves Swami devastated. “All the jarring, rattling, clanking, spurting, and hissing of the moving train softened in the distance into something that was half a sob and half a sigh.”

As for myself, I'm booked on an overnight train that passes Malleswaram station without stopping. Next morning, reaching the temple town Udupi, the nearest railhead to Agumbe, I plan to hire a taxi, and with some luck I'll find a cabbie named Gaffur, like the driver in Narayan's stories.

The coastal air is sweltering, like breathing hot steam. As *dosa* happened to be one of Narayan's favourite snacks, the first thing I do is to have a gigantic metre-long *masala dosa* at the Mitra Samaj canteen by the Krishna temple. There and then, life already feels very Malgudi. Once I get into a taxi, the driver's name turns out to be Krishna Prasad, which roughly translates as “food item consecrated to the god Krishna” and which isn't bad at all considering that the Udupi Krishna temple is the main tourist attraction in these parts. He is exceptionally efficient, too, and drives up the narrow mountain road so fast it's like bungee jumping uphill.

The 55-kilometre journey to Agumbe is a tunnel of emerald greenery, areca nut plantations, and rubber-tree nurseries. When he first visited Agumbe in 1939, Narayan described the view towards the ocean as “a spectacle which is worth travelling a thousand miles to watch.” On the ascent up the serpentine road, we run into a cloud after the third hairpin bend, and as we drive into Agumbe, following another dozen increasingly scary bends, the mist is so thick that it's like entering a fading photograph of a town . . . or hamlet, as this turns out to be.

*Finally, I'm in Malgudi!* Everything looks like the TV series but less crowded. There are barely any people. No cars. It is so quiet it's magical. Central Agumbe is essentially a T-junction, called a “circle,” with a post office, a bus stand, some shops, canteens like the roomless Hotel Kubera, a bank, and a school with a faded board outside (I decipher the name “S. V. S. High School”). Could this have been the Albert Mission College featured in

the TV series?

A winding side lane named Car Street (where I see no cars) takes me to a village square with the Sri Venugopala Krishnaswamy Temple, which looks familiar; a primary school, where kids like Swami and his friends crowd the classrooms; and a ruined pilgrims' hostel, which was built in 1906—incidentally the year of Narayan's birth. People use the ruin to dry coconut husks.

Everybody I speak to—from the postman to the shopkeepers—remembers *Malgudi Days*, which was filmed here in 1985 and 1986. When asked where the shooting happened, they all say, "Everywhere." Most villagers got walk-on parts, doing cameos in the series that transformed Agumbe into a bustling small town, if only for the duration of the shoot. The film's crew and cast, numbering more than 100, were all lodged with villagers. Apparently an 18-foot equestrian statue of the British resident, Sir Frederick Lawley (cheekily executed in the form of a caricature by Bangalore-based artist John Devraj), was put up in the T-junction that was turned into a proper "circle" for a time.

The key location, where the filmmakers spent months on end, is Doddamane (The Big House) on the main street. This private home, erected in 1900, has a grand front veranda adorned with pillars and a central courtyard. The first episode that took place in the house was "Maha Kanjoos," which tells the memorable story of a miserly grandfather and his mischievous grandson.

Kasturiakka is the matron of the house and sits on a cot in the inner veranda in the company of two other ladies. Before I quite know how it happened, I have a steaming tumbler of *kashayam* in my hand—a milky, lightly spiced (with basil leaves, I think, and something else I can't quite put my finger on) health beverage trusted in these hills. Kasturiakka's hospitality is the stuff of legend. Visitors to the village can stay in an upstairs room and pay as they like, but she doesn't allow filmy folks anymore. She tells of how the shooting turned everything upside down. Listening to her, it's easy to believe that one has indeed stepped into a different world. The family is proud of how clean Agumbe is and claim it hasn't changed at all since the eldest among them were children in the 1930s. When I step out again, I get a funny feeling that the slow pace here really does adjust one's inner biorhythms to Malgudi time. The air is fresher, dreamier than elsewhere, remarkably so. Or maybe it's because of the fluffy wet clouds that wrap themselves around everything, including my toes.



However close to an ideal village Agumbe might seem, with its kindly, unhurried, educated inhabitants, there are things missing. Where, for example, is the railway? Arasalu station, a 77-kilometre drive north on the rather obscure railway line from Shivamogga to Talguppa, was used for the TV shoot. Its abandoned colonial-era station building was recently developed into a charming Malgudi museum, housing props and memorabilia, which is well worth a detour if one happens to be passing nearby. And there's no clock tower in Agumbe. There's also no Lawley Extension. Suburban living belongs in Agumbe as little as traffic jams do.

The station at Arasalu has been renamed Malgudi Railway Station, which is confusing for passengers wishing to get off at Arasalu, but should you happen to buy a ticket for the Malgudi Express, which is one of the slowest trains in Karnataka, you will end up over 200 kilometres due south in Mysore, where Narayan spent much of his life.

Indeed, the Malgudi map drawn by Clarice Borio and reproduced at Narayan's request in one of his books, if tilted to the right and then a bit to the left, bears a striking resemblance to a map of Mysore. The river Sarayu for one is quite obviously based on Kaveri, south India's great sacred river. Green Hotel on Hunsur Road used to be part of the Premier Studios that in his novels was renamed the Malgudi Film Studio. The fictive Market Street with its Bombay Anand Bhavan feels much like Sayyaji Rao Road with the real-life Bombay Tiffanys Annexe sweets and snacks shop (limited seating on two metal-topped benches) in the factual market building, which is surrounded by any number of places that remind me of Malgudi's Regal Hair-cutting Saloon and other sundry enterprises. The Palace Talkies resembles the genuine Prabha Theatre, which survived the pandemic lockdowns in its futuristically upgraded avatar as Prabha UFO Digital Cinema. And the imagined clock tower resembles the nearby genuine clock tower, which is located a few hundred steps north of the palace.<sup>3</sup> Sampath—the printer of Malgudi—is even said to be based on a real-life printer, who printed Narayan's own Indian Thought Publications (cheaper editions of his writings for the Indian market), and it is a curious but little-known fact that Narayan, at the Metropole Hotel near the railway station, one day observed a *tout* or tour guide in action, which inspired his bestselling novel *The Guide*.

Anyway, Lawley Extension could well be a portrait of Yadavgiri, a suburb behind the railway station where Narayan, in the winter of 1947-1948, purchased a 55x36 metre plot worth about 5,000 rupees and over the next

four or five years built his graceful two-floor home. One would pass without a second glance if one didn't know, as it is dwarfed by its posh neighbours. But a useful landmark is the Paradise Hotel, where Narayan and his brother Laxman dined in the 1980s and which still stands across the street.

Shockingly enough, the house was sold to a builder and was about to be demolished in 2011. Waking up to this cultural calamity, booklovers demanded that this irreplaceable legacy be rescued, so since 2016 it's a museum where visitors may check out the author's library, shirts, muffler, and grey jacket. (Before the pandemic struck, 17,000 fans had already taken the opportunity to pay their respects.)

It's strangely moving to see the old-fashioned kitchen and imagine him making himself a cup of coffee. A fastidious caffeinist, he apparently had an impressive collection of eight percolators, and I recall publisher David Davidar mentioning, in a preface to a collection of Narayan's stories, that "after offering me some superb home-brewed filter coffee, he showed me around the house that he'd had constructed to his specifications, especially the many-windowed study on the top floor from which he could look out upon the town which had provided much of the raw material for his stories." Although he generally ate and slept in the joint-family home in nearby Lakshmipuram, he used to come here to write in his "office." The study that Davidar refers to is a sunny bay room with eight windows that gave panoramic 180° views of the entire city plus playful birds and squirrels.

Apart from a heavy Kashmiri walnut writing desk (no longer in evidence), the room was unadorned save for a cot, an upholstered chair, a framed photograph of his late wife, and some bookshelves built into the wall. As he notes in *My Days*: "I found it helpful to curtain off a large window beside my desk so that my eyes might fall on nothing more attractive than a grey drape, and thus I managed to write a thousand words a day." Obviously, his fiction mustn't be disturbed by the real world. The first novel he completed here is believed to be *The Financial Expert*, and the last would be *The World of Nagaraj* (1990).

Eventually I find a conclusive clue in Narayan's essay "Misguided Guide" (1967), where he talks extensively about the aforementioned Bollywood movie *The Guide*. The film team, which included the Nobel Prize-winning scriptwriter Pearl S. Buck, apparently came all the way to Mysore to see the settings for the book. Narayan writes, "I showed them the river steps and a little shrine overshadowed by a banyan on the banks of Kaveri, which was

the actual spot around which I wrote *The Guide*. As I had thought, nothing more needed to be done than put the actors there and start the camera.”<sup>4</sup>

So there, he admitted it. He took the moviemakers to the top of Gopalswamybetta, the highest peak in the Bandipur National Park, up a steep jungly road where one might encounter tigers or elephants. “At the summit I showed them the original of the ‘Peak House’ in my novel, a bungalow built fifty years ago, with glassed-in verandas affording a view of wildlife at night, and a 2,000-foot drop to a valley beyond. A hundred yards off, a foot-track wound through the undergrowth, leading on to an ancient temple whose walls were crumbling and whose immense timber doors moved on rusty hinges with a groan. Once again I felt that here everything was ready-made for the film.” It is easy to imagine his disappointment when *The Guide* was shot in Rajasthan and Gujarat instead of Karnataka.<sup>5</sup>

It is a well-known fact that Narayan liked to saunter about in his hometown for inspiration and to socialize with the various characters he met on its streets (talkative men, printers, vendors of sweets, and other oddballs), which he considered to be part of his “office hours,” or at least that’s what he once told fellow writer Ved Mehta. In an obituary, Khushwant Singh described his own visit to Mysore and how “being with Narayan on his afternoon stroll was an experience. He did not go to a park but preferred walking up the bazaar.” There, Narayan stopped “at shops to exchange *namaskaras* with the owners, introduce me and exchange gossip with them in Kannada or Tamil,” which gave Singh an insight into how Narayan got “material for his novels and stories.”

Without Narayan to guide me, I spend a day walking in his footsteps, from Bojanna Lane, where formative experiences took place in his childhood, to the family’s house in Lakshmipuram, a fancier area with a clear Tamil vibe. And I recall how he typed his first stories on a second-hand typewriter. To get his friends to listen, he treated them to coffee and sweets, running up such a long bill that he had to sell the typewriter to clear his dues. But it must have been worth it, as he remarked “the cup of coffee blunted the listeners’ critical faculties and made them declare my work a masterpiece.” Without a typewriter, he had a typist hammer out his handwritten manuscripts on demi-sized bond paper. Following clues in *My Days*, I next walk to where the typist lived by the Jaganmohan Palace. Narayan would follow him to his stall through the narrow alley by the temple on the corner—now the ostentatiously named Sri Brahmathantra Swathantra Parakala Swamy

Mutt—to Santhepete Bazaar behind the Hardinge Complex.

Leaving the typist to his work, Narayan usually walked up to the market, opposite which there's still a bookshop he frequented in the hope that it would one day stock his books, but when I ask for Mysore-related literature the proprietor only shows me expensive books on the maharajahs. When I specify what I'm interested in, it turns out that they have a single title by Narayan tucked away in the back. After I pay for it, I continue to a nearby stationery shop, R. Krishnaswami, which was another of Narayan's hang-outs. The proprietor remembers him and says they kept a chair out in front, where he sat to watch people and take notes. I ask what pencil he used and am shown their enduring bestsellers.

The local Apsara brand is cheap at six rupees, so Narayan bought those when he was short on money, but when he could afford it he'd upgrade to Staedtler pencils. "A hundred years ago we were one of only three shops in India to stock these, the others were a shop in Bombay and another one in Madras," I'm told.

As I get myself a luxurious 625-rupee set, I hope they'll bring me Narayan's blessings.

## Notes

1. In *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961) a brass food container found in a dead man's room is opened and the "smell of stale food hit the ceiling—a strong-smelling, overspiced chicken *pulav*, brown and unattractive and stuffed up to the lid." In *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) a character feels nauseous at the sheer mention of chicken *pulav*, crying out "Chicken! Chicken! Oh! I can't stand the thought of it!"

2. This appears to be a widespread theory, as T. J. S. George makes a similar claim in his book *Askew: A Short Biography of Bangalore* (2016): "The only neighbourhood culturally comparable to Basavangudi was Malleshwaram, developed in 1898 around the seventeenth-century Kadu Malleshwara temple. RK Narayan joined the two precincts to form Malgudi, the small town where his stories took place."

3. The fact that Malgudi has no palace is the main difference between the fictional city and Narayan's hometown. Another intriguing detail regarding the books is that they form a loose autobiographical arch should one read them with that in mind: *Swami and Friends* is on Narayan's childhood, *The*

*Bachelor of Arts* (1937) is about his student years up to his marriage, *The English Teacher* (1945) deals with his early working life and the premature death of his wife (he himself tells us so in his autobiography), and other novels make use of his experience of writing for cinema, his attempts at launching a periodical, and so on.

4. He always emphasized that Malgudi can't be found in any one place, whether it be Agumbe, Mysore, Coimbatore, Mangudi, or Lalgudi, and in a 1981 preface to his collected short stories he even declared that Malgudi is so universal that it might as well be found in the vicinity of the Chelsea Hotel in Manhattan: "West Twenty-third Street, where I have lived for months at a time off and on since 1959, possesses every element of Malgudi, with its landmarks and humanity remaining unchanged—the drunk lolling on the steps of the synagogue, the shop sign announcing in blazing letters EVERYTHING IN THIS STORE MUST GO WITHIN A WEEK, FIFTY PER CENT OFF ON ALL ITEMS . . ."

5. The urban locations used for *Malgudi Days* appear to be in Mysore. In one episode, for example, I spot what is now the Green Hotel (part of Premier Studios from 1954 to 1989). This regal century-old building has a Malgudi coffee shop, and there I find myself drinking the nicest *café au lait* in town. I suspect that Narayan, who was fussy about coffee and constantly chasing the perfect blend, would have enjoyed a sip of it too.