

Azad Hind Fouz Smriti Mahavidyalaya
Domjur, Howrah

Semester 1 (CCF)

AEC
(ABILITY ENHANCEMENT COURSE)
Compulsory English

Unit 2: Prose

Out of Business
R. K. Narayan

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July to December 2025

Out of Business

R. K. Narayan

Little over a year ago Rama Rao went out of work when a gramophone company, of which he was the Malgudi agent, went out of existence. He had put into that agency the little money he had inherited, as security. For five years his business brought him enough money, just enough, to help him keep his wife and children in good comfort. He built a small bungalow in the Extension and was thinking of buying an old Baby car for his use.

And one day, it was a bolt from the blue, the crash came. A series of circumstances in the world of trade, commerce, banking and politics was responsible for it. The gramophone company, which had its factory somewhere in North India, automatically collapsed when a bank in Lahore crashed, which was itself the result of a Bombay financier's death. The financier was driving downhill when his car flew off sideways and came to rest three hundred feet below the road. It was thought that he had committed suicide because the previous night his wife eloped with his cashier.



Rama Rao suddenly found himself in the streets. At first he could hardly understand the full significance of this collapse. There was a little money in the bank and he had some stock on hand. But the stock moved out slowly; the prices were going down, and he could hardly realize a few hundred rupees. When he applied for the refund of his security, there was hardly anyone at the other end to receive his application.

The money in the bank was fast melting. Rama Rao's wife now tried some measures of economy. She sent away the cook and the servant; withdrew the children from a fashionable nursery school and sent them to a free primary school. And then they let out their bungalow and moved to a very small house behind the Market.

Rama Rao sent out a dozen applications a day and wore his feet out looking for employment. For a man approaching forty, looking for employment does not come very easily, especially when he has just lost an independent, lucrative business. Rama Rao was very businesslike in stating his request. He sent his card in and asked, 'I wonder, sir, if you could do something for me. My business is all

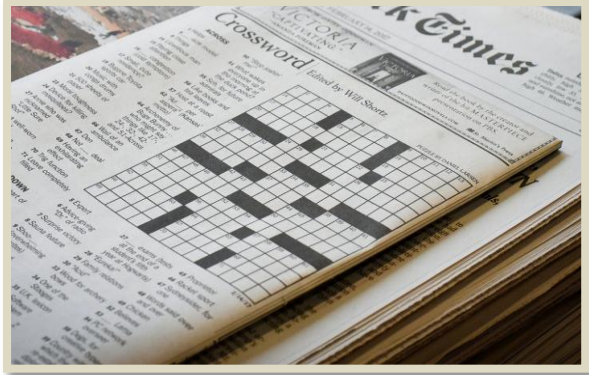
gone through no fault of my own. I shall be very grateful if you can give me something to do in your office . . .’

‘What a pity, Rama Rao! I am awfully sorry, there is nothing at present. If there is an opportunity I will certainly remember you.’

It was the same story everywhere. He returned home in the evening; his heart sank as he turned into his street behind the Market. His wife would invariably be standing at the door with the children behind her, looking down the street. What anxious, eager faces they had! So much of trembling, hesitating hope in their faces. They seemed always to hope that he would come back home with some magic fulfilment. As he remembered the futile way in which he searched for a job, and the finality with which people dismissed him, he wished that his wife and children had less trust in him. His wife looked at his face, understood and turned in without uttering a word; the children took the cue and filed in silently. Rama Rao tried to improve matters with a forced heartiness. ‘Well, well. How are we all today?’ To which he received mumbling, feeble responses from his wife and children. It rent his heart to see them in this condition. At the Extension how this girl would sparkle with flowers and a bright dress; she had friendly neighbours, a women’s club and everything to keep her happy there. But now she hardly had the heart or the need to change in the evenings, for she spent all her time cooped up in the kitchen. And then the children. The house in the Extension had a compound and they romped about with a dozen other children; it was possible to have numerous friends in the fashionable nursery school. But here the children had no friends and could play only in the back yard of the house. Their shirts were beginning to show tears and frays. Formerly they were given new clothes once in three months. Rama Rao lay in bed and spent sleepless nights over it.

All the cash in hand was now gone. Their only source of income was the small rent they were getting for their house in the Extension. They shuddered to think what would happen to them if their tenant should suddenly leave.

*It was in this condition that Rama Rao came across a journal in the Jubilee Reading Room. It was called *The Captain*. It consisted of four pages, and all of them were devoted to crossword puzzles. It offered every week a first prize of four thousand rupees.*



For the next few days his head was free from family cares. He was thinking intensely of his answers: whether it should be TALLOW or FOLLOW. Whether BAD or MAD or SAD would be most apt for a clue which said, 'Men who are this had better be avoided.' He hardly stopped to look at his wife and children standing in the doorway when he returned home in the evenings. Week after week he invested a little money and sent his solutions, and every week he awaited the results with a palpitating heart. On the day a solution was due he hung about the newsagent's shop, worming himself into his favour in order to have a look into the latest issue of The Captain without paying for it. He was too impatient to wait till the journal came on the table in the Jubilee Reading Room. Sometimes the newsagent would grumble, and Rama Rao would pacify him with an awkward, affected optimism. 'Please wait. When I get a prize I will give you three years' subscription in advance . . .' His heart quailed as he opened the page announcing the prize-winners. Someone in Baluchistan, someone in Dacca and someone in Ceylon had hit upon the right set of words; not Rama Rao. It took three hours for Rama Rao to recover from this shock. The only way to exist seemed to be to plunge into the next week's puzzle; that would keep him buoyed up with hope for a few days more.

This violent alternating between hope and despair soon wrecked his nerves and balance. At home he hardly spoke to anyone. His head was always bowed in thought. He quarrelled with his wife if she refused to give him his rupee a week for the puzzles. She was of a mild disposition and was incapable of a sustained quarrel, with the result that he always got what he wanted, though it meant a slight sacrifice in household expenses.

One day the good journal announced a special offer of eight thousand rupees. It excited Rama Rao's vision of a future tenfold. He studied the puzzle. There were only four doubtful corners in it, and he

might have to send in at least four entries. A larger outlay was indicated. 'You must give me five rupees this time,' he said to his wife, at which that good lady became speechless. He had become rather insensitive to such things these days, but even he could not help feeling the atrocious nature of his demand. Five rupees were nearly a week's food for the family. He felt disturbed for a moment; but he had only to turn his attention to speculate whether HOPE or DOPE or ROPE made most sense (for 'Some people prefer this to despair') and his mind was at once at rest.

After sending away the solutions by registered post he built elaborate castles in the air. Even if it was only a share, he would get a substantial amount of money. He would send away his tenants, take his wife and children back to the bungalow in the Extension and leave all the money in his wife's hands for her to manage for a couple of years or so; he himself would take a hundred and go away to Madras and seek his fortune there. By the time the money in his wife's hands was spent, he would have found some profitable work in Madras.

On the fateful day of results Rama Rao opened *The Captain*, and the correct solution stared him in the face. His blunders were numerous. There was no chance of getting back even a few annas now. He moped about till the evening. The more he brooded over this the more intolerable life seemed ... All the losses, disappointments and frustrations of his life came down on him with renewed force. In the evening instead of turning homeward he moved along the Railway Station Road. He slipped in at the level crossing and walked down the line a couple of miles. It was dark. Far away the lights of the town twinkled, and the red and green light of a signal post loomed over the surroundings a couple of furlongs behind him. He had come to the conclusion that life was not worth living. If one had the misfortune to be born in the world, the best remedy was to end matters on a railway line or with a rope ('Dope? Hope?' his mind asked involuntarily). He pulled it back. 'None of that,' he said to it and set it rigidly to contemplate the business of dying. Wife, children . . . nothing seemed to matter. The only important thing now was total extinction. He lay across the lines. The iron was still warm. The day had been hot. Rama Rao felt very happy as he reflected that in less than ten minutes the train from Trichinopoly would be arriving.

He lay there he did not know how long. He strained his ears to catch the sound of the train, but he heard nothing more than a vague rattling and buzzing far off . . . Presently he grew tired of lying down there. He rose and walked back to the station. There was a good crowd on the platform. He asked someone, 'What has happened to the train?'

'A goods train has derailed three stations off, and the way is blocked. They have sent up a relief. All the trains will be at least three hours late today . . .'

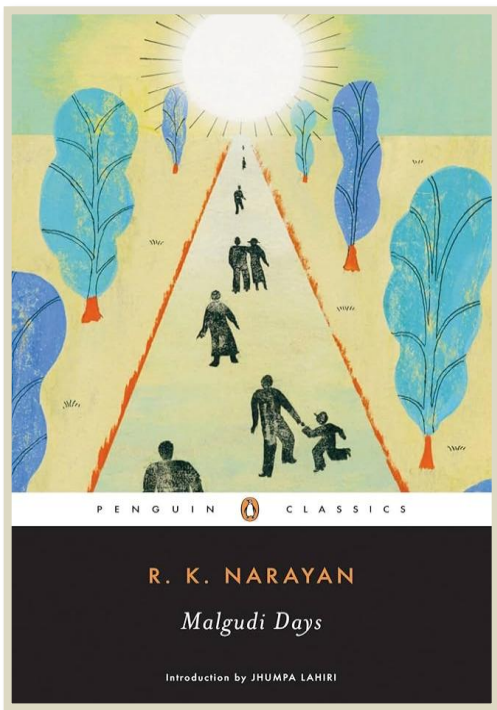
'God, you have shown me mercy!' Rama Rao cried, and ran home.

His wife was waiting at the door, looking down the street. She brightened up and sighed with relief on seeing Rama Rao. She welcomed him with a warmth he had not known for over a year now. 'Oh, why are you so late today?' she asked. 'I was somehow feeling very restless the whole evening. Even the children were worried. Poor creatures! They have just gone to sleep.'

When he sat down to eat she said, 'Our tenants in the Extension bungalow came in the evening to ask if you would sell the house. They are ready to offer good cash for it immediately.' She added quietly, 'I think we may sell the house.'

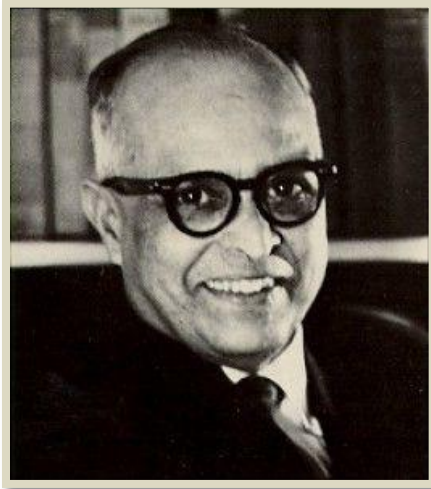
'Excellent idea,' Rama Rao replied jubilantly. 'This minute we can get four and a half thousand for it. Give me the half thousand and I will go away to Madras and see if I can do anything useful there. You keep the balance with you and run the house. Let us first move to a better locality . . .'

'Are you going to employ your five hundred to get more money out of crossword puzzles?' she asked quietly. At this Rama Rao felt depressed for a moment and then swore with great emphasis, 'No, no. Never again.'

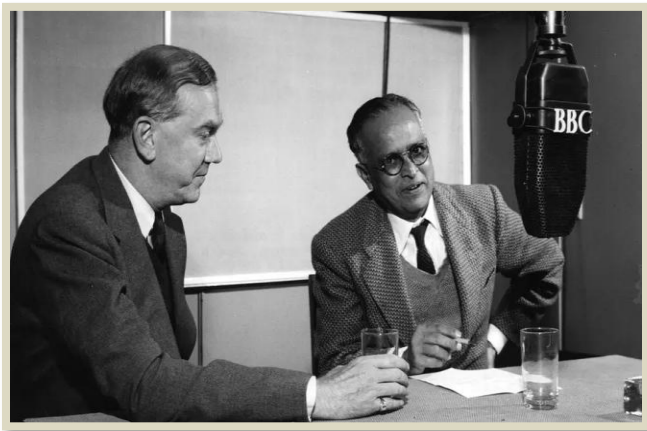


The Author:

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayana Swami (1906-2001) popularly known as **R. K. Narayan** was an Indian writer and novelist. He set his literary works in the fictional (imaginary) South Indian town called **Malgudi**.

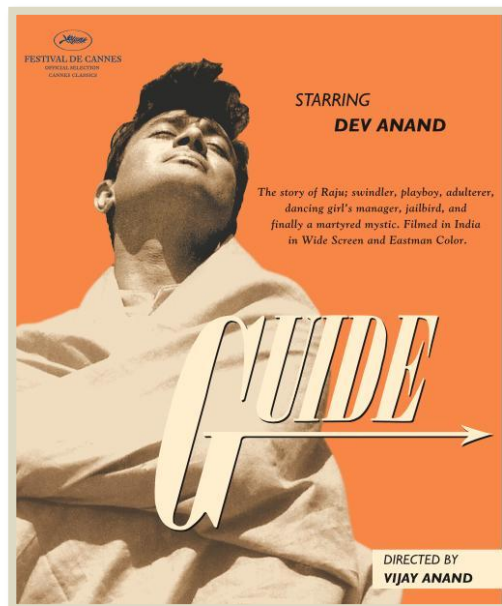
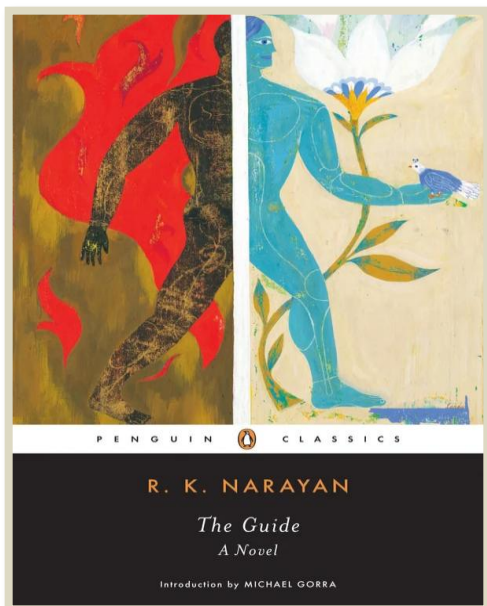


R. K. Narayan was born in a Tamil Brahmin family in Madras (Chennai), British India. His father was a school headmaster and Narayan studied at his father's school. As his father was frequently transferred, Narayan spent a part of his childhood with his maternal grandmother, Parvati. She taught him mythology, classical Indian music and Sanskrit. The family usually conversed in English, and errors on the part of Narayan and his siblings (brothers and sisters) were frowned upon. Narayan moved to Mysore when his father was transferred to the Maharajah's College High School. Narayan was an eager reader and in his childhood. After completing his graduation from Maharaja College of Mysore, he briefly worked as a school teacher; but left when he realized that writing was his true career. In 1930, Narayan wrote his first novel, *Swami and Friends* which was rejected by several publishers. In this book, Narayan created **Malgudi**, the imaginary town that portrayed the society of India and the socio-political changes of British and post-independence India. The book was finally published in 1935 in Great Britain by publisher Hamish Hamilton Limited on the recommendation of **Graham Greene**, the English writer, who became Narayan's lifelong friend and mentor.



Narayan's next novel, *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) was inspired by his college experiences and was published again at the recommendation of Greene. His third novel, *The Dark Room* (1938) explored domestic conflict. The death of Narayan's wife, Rajam, inspired his next novel, *The English Teacher*. It was an autobiographical book which completed a trilogy following *Swami and Friends* and *The Bachelor of Arts*. R. K. Narayan's first collection of short stories, *Malgudi Days* was published in 1942. Narayan started his own publishing company, 'Indian Thought Publications' which was a success and is still managed by his granddaughter, Bhuvaneswari. R. K. Narayan's stories deal with ordinary people, like next-door neighbours, and their lives. Having published more than thirty novels and hundreds of short stories, Narayan brought Indian writing in English to the worldwide readers.

Narayan won numerous awards like the *Sahitya Akademi Award* for his novel, *The Guide* in 1958. When the book was made into a film, he received the Filmfare Award for the best story. In 1964 he received the *Padma Bhushan*. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature multiple times, but never won. Recognition also came in the form of Honorary Doctorates from the University of Leeds (1967), Delhi University (1973) and the University of Mysore (1976). Toward the end of his career, Narayan was nominated to the Rajya Sabha of the Indian Parliament. A year before his death, in 2000, he was awarded India's second-highest civilian honour, the *Padma Vibhushan*. Narayan's home in Mysore has been converted to a museum in 2016 and in 2019 *Swami and Friends* was chosen as one of BBC's *100 Novels That Shaped Our World*.



Short Questions:

1. Who is the author of *Out of Business*?
The author of *Out of Business* is R. K. Narayan.
2. To which Indian state did R.K. Narayan belong?
R. K. Narayan belonged to Tamil Nadu in South India.
3. What is the name of Narayan's first novel?
R. K. Narayan's first novel is *Swami and Friends* (1935).
4. Which author helped R.K. Narayan get his first novel published?
Graham Greene helped R.K. Narayan get his first novel published.
5. What is the name of Narayan's first collection of short stories?
R. K. Narayan's first collection of short stories is *Malgudi Days* (1942).
6. What was a unique achievement of R.K. Narayan among other Indian writers of English?
R. K. Narayan was the only writer of English who won a Filmfare award.
7. For which novel did R.K. Narayan write a film-script?
R.K. Narayan wrote the film-script of his novel, *The Guide*.
8. In which collection of stories was *Out of Business* published?
Out of Business was published in the short story collection, *Malgudi Days* (1942).
9. What is the theme of *Out of Business*?
The theme of *Out of Business* is wishful thinking is dangerous.
10. Name the town in which *Out of Business* is set.
Out of Business is set in Malgudi, a fictional (imaginary) town in South India.
11. What is the meaning of 'Out of Business'?
'Out of Business' means 'out of work' or 'losing one's job'.
12. Who is the protagonist (main character) of R. K. Narayan's *Out of Business*?
The protagonist of *Out of Business* is Rama Rao.

13. What work did Rama Rao do in *Out of Business*?

Rama Rao was the Malgudi agent of a gramophone company.

14. Where did Rama Rao live?

Rama Rao lived in the Extension of Malgudi, a fictional town in South India.

15. How long had Rama Rao been the agent of the gramophone company?

Rama Rao had been the agent of the gramophone company for five years.

16. What luxuries did Rama Rao enjoy before his business collapsed?

Rama Rao lived in a bungalow in the Extension and he was planning to buy a Baby car before his business collapsed.

17. Where was the factory of the gramophone company located?

The factory of the gramophone company located somewhere in North India.

18. Why did the gramophone company collapse?

The gramophone company collapsed due to the death of a Bombay financier in a car accident which led to the crash of a bank in Lahore.

19. What economic measures did Rama Rao's wife adopt during their financial crisis?

Rama Rao's wife dismissed the cook and the servant, admitted the children in a free primary school, rented out their Extension bungalow and rented a small house behind the Market to save money.

20. What was the only source of income for Rama Rao after his business collapsed?

Rama Rao's only source of income was the rent from their Extension bungalow.

21. How did Rama Rao try to find a job in *Out of Business*?

Rama Rao sent job applications to offices but being a middle-aged man nearing forty he was not successful.

22. What unique idea did Rama Rao get to earn money?

Rama Rao got a unique idea to earn money by solving crossword puzzles and win cash prizes.

23. Where did Rama Rao come across the journal, *The Captain*?

Rama Rao came across the journal, *The Captain*, in the Jubilee Reading Room.

24. What was the name of the journal which offered cash prizes for solving crossword puzzles?
The journal called *The Captain* offered cash prizes for solving crossword puzzles.
25. How many crossword puzzles did *The Captain* publish? How much did money did it offer?
The Captain had four pages of crossword puzzles and offered a first prize of four thousand rupees every week.
26. How much did *The Captain* cost?
The Captain journal cost a rupee per week.
27. How much did the special edition of *The Captain* cost?
The special edition of *The Captain* cost five rupees.
28. What was the special prize offered by *The Captain*?
The Captain offered a special offer of eight thousand rupees for the winner.
29. How many doubts did Rama Rao have in the special edition crossword puzzle of *The Captain*?
Rama Rao had four doubtful corners in the special edition crossword puzzle of *The Captain*.
30. Why did Rama Rao's wife refuse to give him five rupees to buy the special edition of *The Captain*?
Rama Rao's wife refused to give him five rupees to buy the special edition of *The Captain* because the money would buy nearly a week's food for the family.
31. Why did Rama Rao decide to commit suicide in *Out of Business*?
Rama Rao decided to commit suicide as he failed to win the special prize offered by *The Captain*.
32. Why did Rama Rao feel that life was not worth living?
Rama Rao felt that life was not worth living as he failed to win the special prize offered by *The Captain*.
33. How did Rama Rao plan to take his own life?
Rama Rao planned to take his own life by lying down on the railway track to be run over by a train.
34. For which train did Rama Rao wait as he lay on the railway track?
Rama Rao waited for the train from Trichinopoly which was supposed to arrive in less than ten minutes as he lay on the railway track.

35. Why did Rama Rao walk back to the station?

Rama Rao walked back to the station because the train from Trichinopoly was late and his attempt to commit suicide failed.

36. Why didn't the train from Trichinopoly arrive on time?

The train from Trichinopoly did not arrive on time because a goods train had derailed three stations off and the track was blocked for at least three hours.

37. What did Rama Rao realize when his attempt to kill himself failed in *Out of Business*?

Rama Rao realized that God had shown him mercy when his suicide attempt failed.

38. Who was waiting for Rama Rao when he returned home after he failed to commit suicide?

Rama Rao's wife was waiting for him when he returned home after he failed to commit suicide.

39. What news did Rama Rao get from his wife after he returned home?

Rama Rao's wife told him, that their tenants had come with an offer to buy the Extension bungalow and they were ready to offer good cash immediately.

40. How were Rama Rao's financial problems solved?

Rama Rao's financial problems were solved by selling their Extension bungalow to the tenants.

41. How much money did Rama Rao expect to get by selling their Extension bungalow?

Rama Rao expected to get four and a half thousand rupees by selling their Extension bungalow.

42. Why did Rama Rao wish to go to Madras?

Rama Rao wished to go to Madras to look for a job.

43. How much money did Rama Rao need to go to Madras?

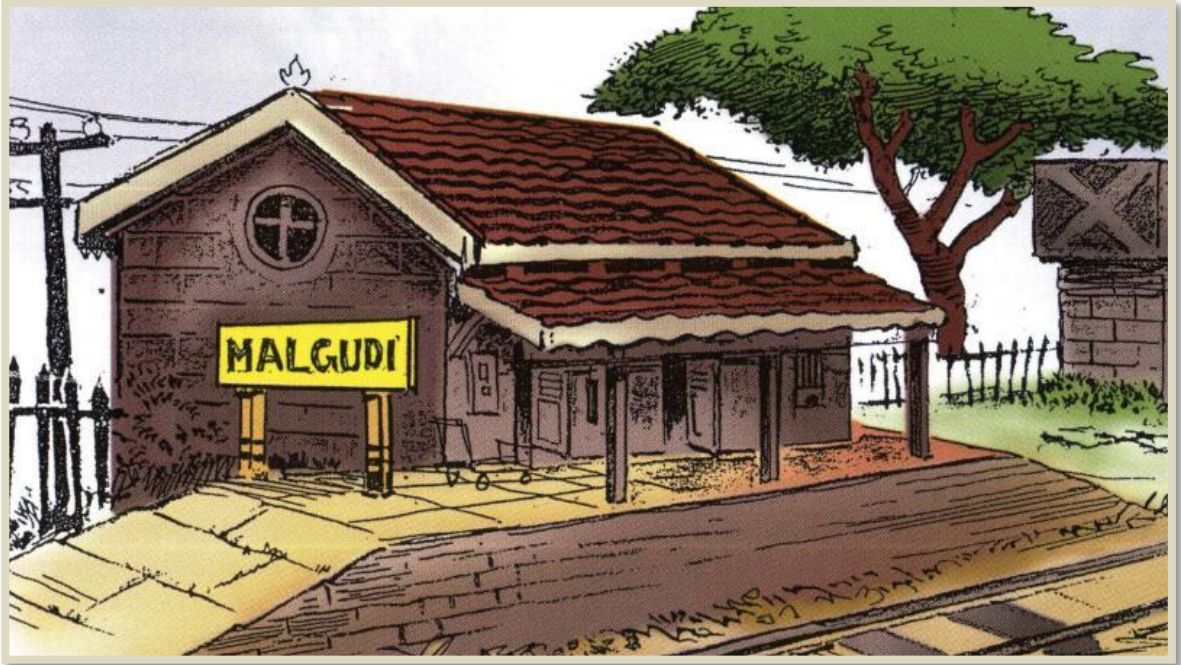
Rama Rao needed half a thousand i.e. five hundred rupees to go to Madras to find a job.

44. How much money Rama Rao intended to leave with his wife when he went to Madras?

Rama Rao intended to leave four thousand rupees with his wife for household expenses.

45. What did Rama Rao promise his wife never to do again?

Rama Rao promised his wife never to waste money on crossword puzzles again – '*Never again*'.



A fictional town in South India



R.K. Narayan House – Mysore. Museum of India.