

Vishnu, Adishesha Together Again

Amma, Shiv and Veer looked up in wonder at the sight in front of them. The rolling hills, covered in a carpet of lush green, towered before them as if to touch the sky. Waterfalls gushed down the red sandstone cliffs in a series of mini cascades, like strands of silver threads suspended against the hillside. The morning sun reflected off the mountain lakes and threw flashes of light that darted and danced across the green valleys. The three of them were at the foothills of the Tirumala range and were about to start their journey up the most sacred of the seven hills to the site of the famous Sri Venkateswara Swamy Temple, also known as the Tirupati Balaji Temple. 'This is not just another temple, boys,' said Amma as the car that they had rented for the day purred up the hills. 'It is one of the most visited place of worship in the world.' 'Wow!' exclaimed Shiv. 'But why?' jumped in Veer. 'What is so special about it, Amma?' 'The great God Vishnu himself is believed to have lived on the hill and the temple is dedicated to him,' answered Amma. 'He is known as Venkateswara, which means "the remover of sins", and the hill is named Venkatadri after him. People have been coming here for more than a thousand years and believe that a prayer to Venkateswara does not go unanswered for he has the power to make their wishes come true.'

The cool breeze blew across their faces as the car made its way along the winding road up to the peak. Rows of red, pink and yellow bougainvillea bushes lined the broad roads, their flowerlike spring leaves waving gaily. The route was dotted with signboards that read OmVenkatesaya Namah — 'Salutation to Lord Venkateswara' — and the sound of Om wafted from loudspeakers attached to electricity poles, reverberating across the hills. A few caramel coloured deer grazing on the hillside looked up at them with innocent eyes as they passed by, drawing a shout of delight from Shiv. 'I didn't know there are animals in the forest on this hill. Are there others too?' he asked. 'I don't know about other animals, but I do know about a giant snake who lives here,' said Amma mischievously. 'What? A giant snake!' exclaimed Veer. 'Don't worry. He is not dangerous. Are you boys ready for your first story of the day,' asked Amma.

Both the boys nodded eagerly. 'We're always ready for a story, Amma!' said Shiv. 'According to an ancient legend, these hills are actually the coiled body of an enormous divine snake called Adishesha or Shesh Naag, who is Vishnu's loyal friend and also his guardian. Once, the powerful wind god, Vayu went to visit Vishnu as his home on the heavenly Mount Vaikuntha. Adishesha was standing guard at the entrance and he blocked Vayu's way. "How dare you stop me!" roared Vayu. Vishnu heard the loud voices at his doorstep and came out to investigate. He found Adishesha and Vayu locking horns, each boasting about how he was more powerful than the other. Vishnu tried to reason with them but to no avail. "The only way to decide this is a contest," suggested Vishnu. "I have an idea, Adishesha, why don't you climb Mount Meru and hold the mountain in your coils as firmly as you can, while you, Vayu, try to dislodge Adishesha. Whoever succeeds will be the stronger of the two." They both agreed. Adishesha wound his massive coils round and round the mountain, until his hood covered the peak. Seeing this, Vayu started blowing as hard as he could. He sent tornadoes, whirlwinds and hurricanes to blow the snake off the mountain, but Adishesha held on tightly. Several days passed and neither yielded. 'Then suddenly the wind died down and silence enveloped

the mountain. Adishesha thought that Vayu had given up and he lowered his guard.

In that moment, Vayu summoned all his divine might and blew as hard as he could. Adishesha and part of the hill were whisked away and they landed on earth, at this very spot. 'Adishesha was so dejected by his defeat that he continued to lie where he had fallen and refused to return to the heavens. To appease him, Vishnu said, "My dear friend, don't be disheartened. We will be together on earth as we were in heaven. I will come and live with you here, and you will take the form of a magnificent mountain range that people will visit and worship for ages to come." 'So that is the legend of how these hills came to be,' said Amma. 'The seven peaks that you see are said to be the seven hoods of Adishesha.' 'So we are actually driving up Adishesha's back!' said Shiv, gazing at the hills to see if he could make out the coils of the snake. 'Did Vishnu keep his promise to come to earth and live with Adishesha?' asked Veer. 'Of course,' replied Amma. 'He lived on this hill and it's even named after him, remember? There are many stories and legends about Vishnu and these hills; it could take me hours to tell you all of them.' 'Veer, look!' shouted Shiv, pointing to the peak that had just come in sight as their car turned along yet another curve. Brilliantly lit up by the morning sun and nestled against the green backdrop of the thickly forested hill, stood a tall pyramid-shaped ivory coloured tower or gopuram. There it was: one of the most popular temples in the world — Sri Venkateswara Swamy Temple of Tirupati. Amma, Shiv and Veer were captivated by the first sight of the famous shrine. (This is an abridged version.) ■