

“Tiru, Tiru, Tiru!”



This year, the Deepam festival was going to be celebrated on the full moon night of a wintry December. A flame would be lit on the top of the holy mountain of Arunachala. People had already begun to arrive to see the Rath yatra during which the god of the temple would be taken out in a chariot around the town of Tiruvannamalai.

Amma had got a nice red t-shirt for me, and a striped yellow one for my cousin Thilakan. “Appu,” she said, “you will look very smart in it.” She was sitting beside me on the hard seat of the bus, the pallu of her



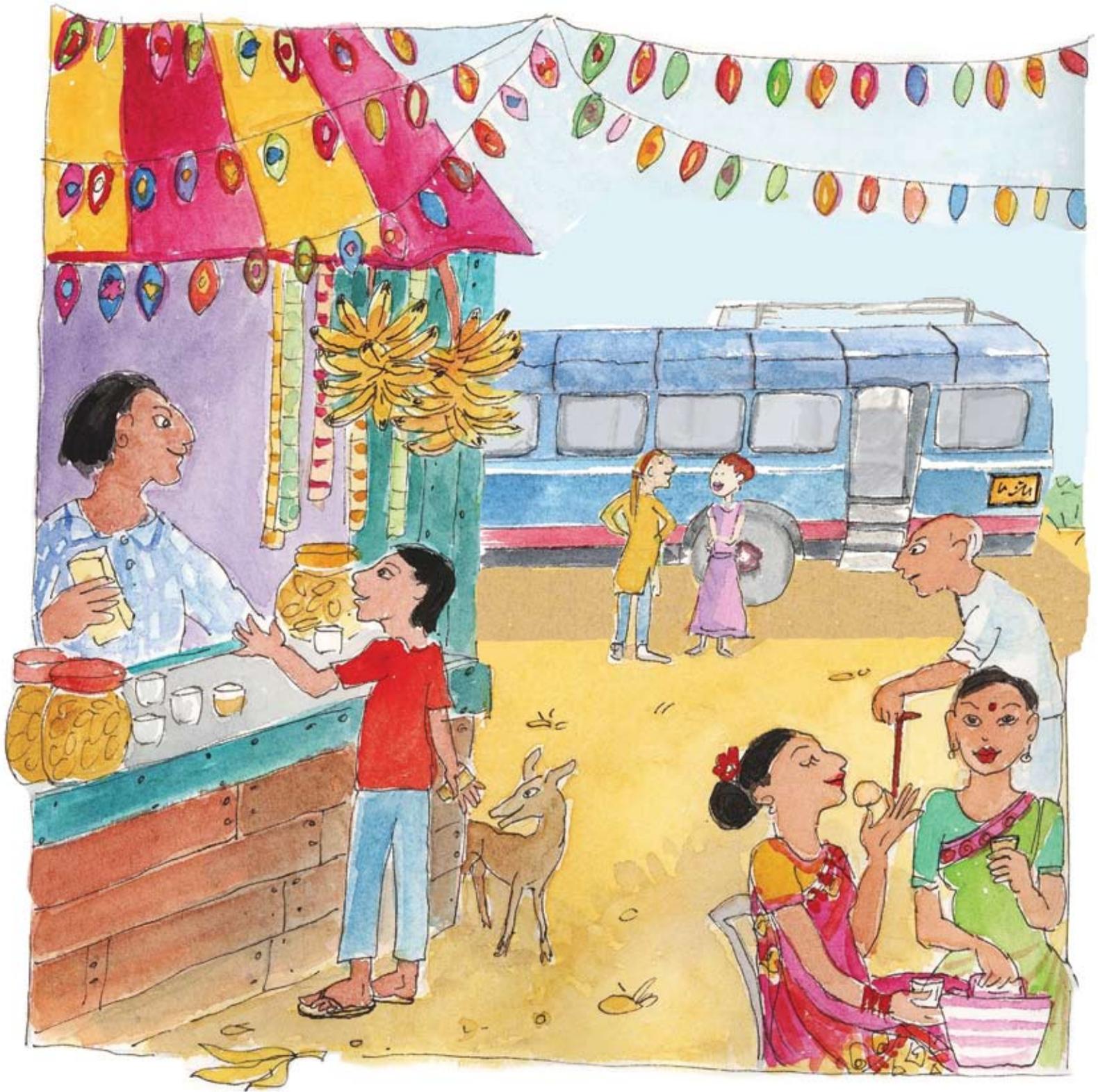


red-and-orange sari drawn tight across her nose to block the clouds of dust that rose whenever the bus veered off the tarred road. “Amma, why is everyone saying ‘Tiru, Tiru, Tiru?’” asked Thilakan. Her eyes twinkled as she looked around the bus and told me, “Boys, do you see all these *gora log*, meaning the foreigners, riding in the bus with us? They can’t pronounce ‘Tiruvannamalai’ correctly, their tongues get all twisted when they have to say it. So, they started calling it ‘Tiru’. It’s shorter, sweeter and easier for everyone to say.”



I turned to look at the *gora log*.

Some of the women wore cotton saris, others wore badly tailored salwar kurtas. The *gora men* wore cotton t-shirts with ‘Om’ or ‘Ram’ printed on them and ill-fitting pyjamas that rode high up their ankles. They were excitedly pointing to a herd of goats that were crossing the path. With a wailing screech of brakes, the driver slowed down



the bus to let them pass. Soon, our bus skidded to a halt at a roadside tea and *vada* (a fried, salty doughnut) stall. Almost all the passengers got off to stretch their legs. The few tin chairs placed around the stall were quickly taken by those passengers who were the first to tumble out of the bus. I ran quickly to relieve myself in the fields behind the tea stall, and then ran back to ask my mother, who had remained seated in the bus, if she wanted anything. Still not removing the pallu from her nose, she pointed at the bottles of mineral water. I got her one of those, and she stuffed some loose notes into my hands for me to buy what I wanted.

Thilakan and I went up to the stall and told the *lungi* (lower garment) clad man at the counter, “Anna, give us that packet of biscuits.” Then I went to the green-coconut seller and told him to slice open a sweet water coconut for me. While I stood waiting for my turn, one of the pyjama-clad gora men turned to me and after enquiring if I could speak English, asked, “Can you please ask him to give me a coconut also, in your language?” I nodded my head,