

# On the episode of *Naraka-Satyabhāmā yuddham* in Kṛṣṇanāṭṭam

A. Harindranath and A. Purushothaman

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lakṣmīmātanutāt sa vo munivaro vyāsābhīdhānoniśam  
yaḥ prāleyagirāvapāntaratamorūpēṇa nityaṁ tapaḥ  
tanvānasya kalā harēravikalā lokopakārodyatā  
drāgasamdyata bhāratāmṛtajharī yasyeyamāsyēndutaḥ

*May that best among the sages, manifesting as Vyāsa,  
who, in the form of Apāntaratamas [1],  
is eternally engaged in austerities in the snowy mountain (Himalaya),  
whose body is the faultless and complete portion of Viṣṇu,  
who is always engaged in deeds that are beneficial to the world,  
from whose moon-like face quickly rushes forth the nectar stream of Bhārata,  
always bestow propitiousness and prosperity upon us.*

Mānaveda – Pūrvabhārata Caṁpu [2]

## 1 Introduction

Among the many temple arts of Kerala, Kṛṣṇanāṭṭam [3, 4] (also known as Kṛṣṇāṭṭam) deserves special attention. The creator of this art is Mānaveda, the Zamorin (Sāmūtiri) King, who lived in Kerala in the seventeenth century. Mānaveda has composed two great Sanskrit works, *Pūrvabhārata Caṁpu* and *Kṛṣṇagīti*. Inspired by Anantabhaṭṭa's *Bhārata Caṁpu*, the former work completed in 1654 A.D. deals with the incidents in *Mahābhārata* from the early history of Lunar dynasty upto the birth of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Pāṇḍu and Vidura. Hence *Pūrvabhārata Caṁpu*, themewise, is a prequel to Anantabhaṭṭa's work.

*Kṛṣṇagīti* (completed in 1658 A.D.) deals with the life of Kṛṣṇa told in eight cantos: Avatāram, Kāḷiyamardanam, Rāsakrīḍa, Kāmsavadham, Svayaṁvaram, Bāṇayuddham, Vividavadham and Svargārohaṇam. It consists of śloka and gītī set to appropriate rāgas and tālas. The ritual performance Kṛṣṇanāṭṭam, a votive offering at the famous Kṛṣṇa Temple at Guruvayur in Kerala is based on *Kṛṣṇagīti*.

*Kṛṣṇagīti* integrates incidents from *Bhāgavata*, *Mahābhārata* and *Harivaṁśa*. Two important sections of Bāṇayuddham (the sixth canto of *Kṛṣṇagīti*), the granting of salvation to Ghaṇṭākarna and meeting of Kṛṣṇa and Śiva in Kaiḷāsa are based on *Harivaṁśa*. In

the performance of Bāṇayuddham, there is an interesting scene where Kṛṣṇa becomes unconscious while fighting with Narakāsura. Then Satyabhāmā takes up bow and arrow and fights against Narakāsura. Meanwhile, Kṛṣṇa wakes up, rewards Satyabhāmā with a garland, resumes fighting and eventually kills Narakāsura with his Cakra.

In the text *Kṛṣṇagīti*, there is no mention of Satyabhāmā fighting with Narakāsura. To the best of our knowledge, this episode cannot be located in the popular recensions of *Bhāgavata*, *Mahābhārata* and the Bombay, Calcutta and the Critical Editions of *Harivaṁśa*. This episode occurs in the Southern version of *Harivaṁśa* [5], which is included in the appendix to the Critical Edition of *Harivaṁśa* [7] by BORI. There are other texts where one can find this episode. It occurs in Mādhvācārya's *Mahābhārata Tātparyanirṇaya* [6], the earliest known commentary on *Mahābhārata*. It also occurs in *Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caritam Maṇipravāḷam* which is a Mahākāvya in Malayalam ascribed to Kuñcan Nambiar from Kerala in 18<sup>th</sup> century. The relevant passages are quoted in the appendix. The incident occurs also in some Telugu texts as summarized in the appendix.

The most detailed account of Narakāsura's story occurs in *Kālika Purāṇa* [8]. There Satyabhāmā does not fight Narakāsura, but there are indeed some very curious śloka which are quoted in the appendix.

## 2 Naraka-Satyabhāmā yuddham in the Southern Recension of Harivaṁśa

*Harivaṁśa* edited by P.L. Vaidya and published by BORI (1971) has two volumes [7]. First volume is the critical edition and second volume contains appendices. Section 28A of volume II (pages 209-212) is titled *narakasatyabhāmayuddham* and has a detailed description of the fight between Satyabhāmā and Naraka (pages 210-211) [10]. According to the editor, this episode occurs in all southern recensions, that is, four Telugu manuscripts, four Malayalam manuscripts and three Grantha manuscripts. In addition, it occurs in two Devanagari manuscripts not from south.

Interestingly, the editor has spent an entire paragraph (page XLIV) of the Introduction to comment about the incident and his reasons to omit it in the critical edition. He says ... *he (Kṛṣṇa) was accompanied by Satyabhāmā. Instances of women accompanying their husbands on similar occasions are known to Purāṇic literature. .... I think there are no other instances of women actually fighting on the battle field in the Purāṇa literature.*

## 3 In the Kṛṣṇanāṭṭam performance

As already mentioned, Kṛṣṇanāṭṭam takes place in Guruvayur Temple as a votive offering. The performance begins in the temple after the last pūjā (trppuka) is concluded and sanctum sanctorum is closed for the day (usually after 10 PM). Preliminary rituals involve placing

of musical instruments (*Cengila*, *Ilattālam*, *Śuddhamaddaḷam* and *Toppi Maddaḷam* on the ground, lighting of the big lamp (*Kalivilakku*) which itself is a representation of the deity, a few beats on the Maddaḷam invoking Śabdabrahma, recitation of a *maṅgala śloka* and the performance of the auspicious dance *Toṭayam* behind the hand-held curtain. It is to be noted that there is no special stage set for the performance and the audience sit on the ground in front of the lamp and the performance takes place behind the lamp. The statue of Mānaveda with his folded hands offering *praṇām* to the diety is a permanent witness to the performance (see Fig. 1) which takes place for about three hours. Towards the end, the actors perform the auspicious dance *Dhanāśi*. They offer *praṇāms* to the sacred ground, to the flames of the sacred lamp and finally to the deity in the sanctum sanctorum. A few beats on the musical instruments conclude the play.

As noted by Rustom Bharucha [11], divinity pervades Kṛṣṇanāṭṭam which the devotee witnesses as a *Cākṣuṣa Yajña*. In the long period at night when sanctum sanctorum remains closed, Kṛṣṇa's play affords the devotee a vision of the deity in all His splendour [12].

The episodes of Bāṇayuddham are killing of Murāsura, Killing of Narakāsura, meeting with Ghaṇṭākarna, Kṛṣṇa's meeting with Śiva at Kalāsa and war with Bāṇa. Even though the text (*Kṛṣṇagīti*) has no mention of it, the events surrounding Satyabhāma's fight with Naraka as performed (see Figs. 3, 4, 5) follows the text of Harivaṁśa in surprising details.

(1) *tato roṣasamāviṣṭo garudaḥ pakṣipuṅgavaḥ*  
*pakṣeṇa pakṣiṇām śreṣṭhaḥ pothayāmasa dānavam*  
 Garuḍa striking Naraka with wings: Fig. 2.

(2) *satyabhāmā ca taṁ dr̥ṣṭvā vāsudevaṁ tathāgatam*  
*cāmarair vijayāmāsa pakṣābhyaṁ pakṣipuṅgavaḥ*  
 Garuḍa comforting unconscious Kṛṣṇa by flapping his wings: Fig. 3.

(3) *tatra prīto mahāviṣṇuḥ pariṣvajya ca tāṁ vibhuḥ (65)*  
*śramāmbhaścāpi tasyāstu mārjayāmāsa keśavaḥ*  
*tasyāstu kaṇṭhābharaṇaṁ dadau prītau janārdanaḥ*  
 Kṛṣṇa, waking up, gifting a garland to Satyabhāma: Fig. 6.

## 4 Some Observations

Even though all the texts including *Kṛṣṇagīti* which describe the episode of Killing of Naraka explicitly mentions that Satyabhāmā accompanied Kṛṣṇa to Prāgjyotiṣapura, the domain of Naraka, the reason for it is not explained. The clue is given in the Nīlakaṇṭha commentary [13] to the Harivaṁśa śloka

*tataḥ sahaiva śakreṇa śaṅkhacakraḡadāsibhṛt*  
*pratasthe garuḍenātha satyabhāmā sahāyavān*  
 Nīlakaṇṭha comments: *satyabhāmā sahāyavān iti.*

*asyāḥ satyabhāmāyāḥ pṛthivyam̐satvāt pṛthivyājñayaiva tasya mṛtyur vihito/ṣṭīti*  
*satyabhāmāyājñayaiva taṁ haniṣyāmītyāśayaḥ.*

The identification of Satyabhāmā with Goddess Earth appears elsewhere. For example, *Kṛṣṇopaniṣad* [14] explicitly identifies Satyabhāmā with Earth: *satyabhāmā dharēti vā*. The text *Gargasamhita* or *Garga bhāgavatam* [15] also makes this identification: *satyabhāmā vasum̐dharā* (goloka khaṇḍam, adhyāya 4).

The active role of Garuḍa in the performance of Killing of Naraka in Kṛṣṇanāṭṭam is also worth mentioning. Especially in the light of the description of Garuḍa in Kailāsayātrā section of Bhaviṣya Parva of *Harivamśa* [16].

In Kālikā Purāṇa where we find the detailed account of Naraka's life that befits a tragic hero who was a victim to the circumstances, the role of his parents Viṣṇu and Pṛithvī (Goddess Earth) are elaborated. Further we note that in Kālikā Purāṇa, the Book of the Goddess, all manifestations of the Goddess in various forms are amalgamated. Not too surprisingly, in Kṛṣṇanāṭṭam, the *veṣam* of Goddess Earth, Satyabhāmā and Pārvatī are very similar. Only distinguishing feature of Goddess Earth is the crown.

As detailed in the appendix, *narakasatyabhāmāyuddham* whose first appearance in a text seems to be in the Southern *Harivamśa* in the early epic-purāṇic times has survived in the South of India both in textual and performance traditions. A more detailed, in depth study of this subject might reveal many enriching and enlightening surprises.

Salutations to Vyāsa (whom Mānaveda extolls in the maṅgala śloka of his *Pūrvabhārata Cam̐pu*, quoted at the beginning of this article) who elaborated on the episode of *Naraka-Satyabhāmāyuddham* in *Harivamśa*, the supplement to *Mahābhārata* (*śrīmahābhārate khileṣu harivamśe*). Salutations to Mānaveda who instead of summarising the episode in the text (*Kṛṣṇagīti*) elaborated on it in the performance text thereby etching it permanently in the mind of the *prekṣaka*.

## Acknowledgements

We thank Prof. Velcheru Narayana Rao for providing information on Telugu Tradition and for providing hints to consult the Southern version of *Harivamśa*. We owe it to Dr. Martha Ashton-Sikora for reviving our interest in this topic motivated in turn by the Kṛṣṇanāṭṭam performance at Guruvayur temple. We thank Guruvayur Devaswom Administrator Shri V, Ratheesan for granting permission to take photographs of Kṛṣṇanāṭṭam inside the Guruvayur Temple and Shri Venu Edakkazhiyur for facilitating this process.

## A From the Killing of Narakāsura episode in Mahābhārata Tātparyanirṇaya of Mādhvācārya

*jaghne senām garudaḥ pakṣapātaiḥ  
pādaṁ śeṣām keśavaḥ sāyakaughaiḥ  
athāsasādāśu bhaumocyutaṁ tam  
muñcañcharānastrasammantritān drāk  
viyātha tam keśavaḥ sāyakaughair  
bhaumaḥ śataghnim brahmadattāmamuñcat (20.98)*

*acchedyobhedyo nityasamvitsukhātmā  
nityāvyaya pūrṇaśaktiḥ sa kṛṣṇaḥ  
nigīrya taṁ devavaraḥ śataghnim  
nityāśrāntodarśayacchrāntavaccaḥ (20.99)*

*bahūn varān brahmaṇonveṣamoghān  
moghīkrtān vīkṣya parātpareśaḥ  
bhavet kathañcit bahumānena yuktaṁ  
ityeva kṛṣṇodarśayacchrāntavat svam (20.100)*

*tadā drptaṁ narakam vīkṣya devī  
satyādāte kārmukaṁ śārnigasamjñam  
cakāra taṁ yatamānaṁ ca bhaumam  
nirāyudhaṁ virathaṁ ca kṣaṇena (20.101)*

*āliṅgya kṛṣṇaḥ satyabhāmām punaśca  
tathāntare samsthitaṁ bhaumamugram  
sṛjantamastrāṇyarinā nikrtta-  
kandhaṁ mṛtyorarpayāmāsa śīghram (20.102)*

## B From Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caritam Maṇipravāḷam

*Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caritam Maṇipravāḷam* is a Mahākāvya in Malayalam ascribed to Kuñcan Nambiar from Kerala in 18<sup>th</sup> century. The episode of Satyabhāmā fighting Narakāsura occurs in this work.

*pintiriñṇu Garuḍan tadantare*

*hanta! kiñcana mayanñi Mādhavan  
Satyabhāma tarasā dhanussumā-  
yettināḷamaravairi sannidhau*

Garuḍa turned back  
Thereafter Mādhava fainted a little  
Quickly, Satyabhāma came with the bow  
To Naraka's presence.

*Satyabhāmayuṭe śastramēlkkayāl  
kṛttamāyi Narakanre vīgraham  
mattakēśinikalōtu tōlkkumō  
mattanākiya mahāsurōttaman?*

Hit by the arrows of Satyabhāmā  
Naraka's body was shattered, yet  
Is the arrogant, mighty, great Asura  
To court defeat at the hands of women?

*nillu nillu capalē ninakkahō  
villeṭukka yudhi yōgyamalleṭō  
collu kēlppatinasādhyamenkil ñan  
kolluvānini maṭikkayilleṭō*

“Hold it, hold it, you frivolous!  
It doesn't befit you  
To take up arms in the war.  
If you are not willing to listen  
I wouldn't hesitate to kill”

*itthamuddhatamuraccu satvaram  
yuddhamāśu Narakan tuṭanñinān  
kruddhanāmasuravairi cakrama-  
nñuddhariccu samarē viḷanñinān*

Saying thus,  
Naraka restored to fight.  
Angered,  
Holding the Cakra  
The enemy of Asura (Kṛṣṇa) outshone in the war.

## C From the Narakāsura episode in Kālikā Purāṇa [8]

Chapter 40, sloka 68.

*āruhya garudaṁ kṛṣṇaḥ satyabhāmādvitīyakaḥ  
prāgjyotiṣamuhkogacchad vāsavastridivāṁ yayau*

Kṛṣṇa accompanied by Satyabhāmā, mounted Garuḍa and had gone to the city of Prāgjyotiṣa, while Śakra (Indra) returned to heaven.

*sa yuddhyat kṛṣṇanikaṭe kālikāṁ kālikopamām  
raktāsyānayanām dīrghām khadgaśaktidharā tadā (102)  
apaśyāj jagatām dhātrīm kāmākhyamāpi mohinīm (103)  
savismīstastathā bhūtastām drṣtvā jagatām prasūm  
yoddhvyamityeva tadā yuyudhe narakāsuraḥ (104)*

While fighting, he observed tall Kālikā by the side of Kṛṣṇa, similar to Kālikā, with red face and red eyes, wearing sword and śakti (lance), and Kāmākhyā, the protectress of the world, the enchantress.

The demon Naraka having seen Kāmākhyā, the mother of the world siding Kṛṣṇa was surprised and frightened, he then fought the battle for its sake as the fighting was the only course left.

## D Instances from Telugu Tradition

*The following information is from Prof. Velcheru Narayana Rao.*

There are three Telugu texts that contain the incident of Satyabhāmā fighting with Narakāsura [9]. Two of them, *Uttara-harivaṁśamu* by Nacana Somana (a.k.a Somanatha), late 13th century, (1. 149-171), and *Harivaṁśamu* of Errapragada, early 14th century, (Part II, 4.125-172)

describe that Satyabhāmā took the bow from Kṛṣṇa when the latter was wounded from an arrow from Naraka. Kṛṣṇa was unconscious for a while, recovered and asked Satyabhāmā to fight for him, because he was still tired.

*Bhāgavatamu* of Bammera Potana, late 15th century, (10.170-188) describes that Satyabhāmā fought Naraka but does not say that Kṛṣṇa was wounded, or, fell unconscious.

The narrative from Nacana Somana and Errapragada has gained popularity in the oral tradition. There may be other such sources.

## References

- [1] The reference is to the previous birth of Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa as the sage Apāntaratamas. See Chapter 349 of the Śāntiparva, *The Mahābhārata* with the Bhārata Bhāvadīpa Commentary of Nīlakaṇṭha, edited by Pandit Ramachandrashastri Kinjawadekar, reprinted by Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, Second Edition (1979).
- [2] This is the maṅgala śloka of Pūrvabhārata Campu by Mānaveda. Published with the commentary *Kṛṣṇāyām*, by Dr. K. Raghavan Pillai, Kerala University, Anantaśayana Saṁskṛta Grandhāvali, No. 209. Published by Sriramavilasam Press, Kollam (1963).
- [3] Kṛṣṇānāṭṭam, is a votive ritual theatre offering at Guruvayur temple, Kerala, India. For more information, visit the site:  
[http://www.geocities.com/krishnadas\\_a2000/krishna/krishnattam.html](http://www.geocities.com/krishnadas_a2000/krishna/krishnattam.html)
- [4] Krishnattam, Martha Bush Ashton-Sikora and Robert P. Sikora, Oxford and IBH Publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi (1993). ISBN 81-204-0769-5
- [5] We thank Prof. Velcheru Narayana Rao for helpful communications.
- [6] Mādhvācārya, Mahābhārata Tātparya Nirṇaya, available on the internet at <http://www.dvaita.org/sources/mbtn>.
- [7] *Harivaṁśa* being the *Khila* or Supplement to *Mahābhārata*, edited by Parashuram Lakshman Vaidya, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune. Vol. I, Introduction, Critical Text and Notes, (1969). Vol. II, Appendices (1971).
- [8] The Kālikā Purāṇa, Text, introduction and translation in English by Prof. B.N. Shastri, Nag Publishers, Delhi. (First edition 1992).
- [9] Information provided by Prof. Velcheru Narayana Rao.
- [10] The entire chapter from BORI appendix is available on the internet at <http://mahabharata-resources.org/southern/satya-hari.pdf>
- [11] Rustom Bharucha, Preparing for Krishna, chapter ten of *Theatre and the World - Performance and the Politics of Culture*, first published by Manohar Publications, India (1990). Reprinted by Routledge, London (1993).
- [12] guruvāyumandira virociṣṇuḥ sa viṣṇuḥ svayam as Mānaveda says in the *maṅgala śloka* of *Kṛṣṇagīti*.

- [13] *śrīman mahābhāratam*, Part VII, *harivaṁśa parva* with bhārata bhāvādīpa commentary by Nīlakaṇṭha. Edited by Pandit Ramachandrashastri Kinjawadekar. Printed and Published by Shankar Narhar Joshi, Chitrashala Press, 1026 Sadashiv Peth, Poona City. First Edition AD 1936.
- [14] *Kṛṣṇopaniṣad*, available on the internet at [http://sanskritdocuments.org/doc\\_1\\_index.html](http://sanskritdocuments.org/doc_1_index.html).
- [15] *Gargasamhita* or *Gargabhāgavatam*, in Malayalam script with Malayalam commentary by V. Nilakanthan Nampisan and M.N. Narayanan Namputiri, published by Kairali Press and Books, M.G. Road, Trichur-1, Kerala (1986).
- [16] *yajñamūrtiḥ purāṇātmā sāmamūrdhā ca pāvanah*  
*rgvedapakṣavānpakṣī* (3-76-3)

A. Purushothaman (purushothaman\_avaroth@yahoo.com)

A. Harindranath (harindranath\_a@yahoo.com)



Figure 1: Kṛṣṇa unconcious, being attended by Satyabhāmā. Narakāsura blocked by Garuḍa. Note the statue of Mānaveda in the right top corner.



Figure 2: Garuḍa striking Narakāsura with wings.



Figure 3: Satyabhāmā takes up bow and arrow.



Figure 4: Satyabhāmā fighting Narakāsura.



Figure 5: Satyabhāmā fighting Narakāsura, another scene.



Figure 6: Kṛṣṇa presents a garland to Satyabhāmā.