On the episode of *Naraka-Satyabhāmā yuddham* in Kṛṣṇaṇāṭṭam

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lakṣmīmātanutāt sa vo munivarō vyāsābhīdhānomicṣam
yaḥ śrāleyagīrāvapāntaratamorūpēṇa nityaṁ tapaḥ
tanvānaṣya kalā harēavikalā lokopakārodyatā
drāgasamīdyata bhratāmrītaḥ āsyaṛṣeyamāsyēnduḥ

May that best among the sages, manifesting as Vyāsa,
who, in the form of Aṃantarātmās [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.

Mānavedā – Pūrvabhārata Caṃpu [2]

1 Introduction

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

*Kṛṣṇagīti* (completed in 1658 A.D.) deals with the life of Kṛṣṇa told in eight cantos: Avatāraṃ, Kāliyamardanam, Rāsakṛīḍa, Kaṁsavadham, Svayānvaram, Bānayuddham, Vividavadham and Svargārohaṇam. It consists of ślokas and gītis set to appropriate rāgas and tālas. The ritual performance Kṛṣṇaṇāṭṭam, a votive offering at the famous Kṛṣṇa Temple at Guruvayur in Kerala is based on *Kṛṣṇagīti*.

*Kṛṣṇagīti* integrates incidents from *Bhāgavata*, *Mahābhārata* and *Harivaṃśa*. Two important sections of Bānayuddham (the sixth canto of *Kṛṣṇagīti*), the granting of salvation to Ghanṭākārṇa and meeting of Kṛṣṇa and Śiva in Kailāsa are based on *Harivaṃśa*. In
the performance of Bāṇayuddham, there is an interesting scene where Kṛṣṇa becomes unconscious while fighting with Narakaśura. Then Satyabhāmā takes up bow and arrow and fights against Narakaśura. Meanwhile, Kṛṣṇa wakes up, rewards Satyabhāmā with a garland, resumes fighting and eventually kills Narakaśura with his Cakra.

In the text Kṛṣṇagīti, there is no mention of Satyabhāmā fighting with Narakaśura. 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 Harivaṃśa. This episode occurs in the Southern version of Harivaṃśa [5], which is included in the appendix to the Critical Edition of Harivaṃśa [7] by BORI. There are other texts where one can find this episode. It occurs in Mādhvācārya’s Mahābhārata Tātparyanirnaya [6], the earliest known commentary on Mahābhārata. It also occurs in Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caritam Manipravālam which is a Mahākāvyya in Malayalam ascribed to Kuṇcan Nambiar from Kerala in 18th 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 Narakaśura’s story occurs in Kālika Purāṇa [8]. There Satyabhāmā does not fight Narakaśura, but there are indeed some very curious ślokas which are quoted in the appendix.

2 Naraka-Satyabhāmā yuddham in the Southern Recension of Harivaṃśa

Harivaṃśa 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 narakasatyabhāmāyuddham 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 (Ceṅgila, Ilattālam, Suddhamaddalām and Toppi Maddalām on the ground, lighting of the big lamp (Kalivilakku) which itself is a representation of the deity, a few beats on the Maddalam 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 Mānāveda with his folded hands offering pranām to the deity 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 Dhanāṣi. They offer pranāms 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 Krṣṇanāṭṭam which the devotee witnesses as a Cāksuṣa Yajña. In the long period at night when sanctum sanctorum remains closed, Krṣṇa’s play affords the devotee a vision of the deity in all His splendour [12].

The episodes of Bānayuddham are killing of Murāsura, Killing of Narakāsura, meeting with Ghanṭākarna, Krṣṇa’s meeting with Śiva at Kalāsa and war with Bāna. Even though the text (Krṣṇagīti) has no mention of it, the events surrounding Satyabhāma’s fight with Naraka as performed (see Figs. 3, 4, 5) follows the text of Harivamsa in surprising details.

4 Some Observations

Even though all the texts including Krṣṇagīti which describe the episode of Killing of Naraka explicitly mentions that Satyabhāma accompanied Krṣṇa to Prāgjyotisapura, the domain of Naraka, the reason for it is not explained. The clue is given in the Nīlakaṇṭha commentary [13] to the Harivamsa śloka
tatāh sahaiva śakreṇa śanikhacakragadāśibhṛt
pratasthe garudenāthā satyabhāmā sahaśyavan
Nīlakaṇṭha comments: satyabhāmā sahaśyavan iti.
asyāḥ satyabhāmāyaḥ prthivyamśatvāt prthivyājñayaiva tasya mṛtyur vihitośṭiti
satyabhāmāyaḥjñayaiva tam ānisyāmītyāśayaḥ.
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 vasuṁdharā (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 Kailāsayātṛā section of Bhaviṣya Parva of Harivaṁśa[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 Pṛthvī (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 Harivaṁśa in the early epic-purānic 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 Pārvabhāratā Caṁpu, quoted at the beginning of this article) who elaborated on the episode of Naraka-Satyabhāmāyuddham in Harivaṁśa, the supplement to Mahābhārata (śrīmahābhārata khileṣu harivaṁśe). 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 prekṣkaka.

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A  From the Killing of Narakāsura episode in Mahābhārata Tātparyanirṇayaya of Mādhvācāryya

jagāhne senāṁ garūḍaḥ paṅgaṅgātaḥ
pādaṁ śeṣāṁ keśavaḥ sāyakaughaiḥ
athāsāsādāśu bhaumocyutaṁ tam
muñcaṅcharānastrasammantritāṁ drāk
viyātha tam keśavaḥ sāyakaughair
bhaumaḥ śataghniṁ brahmadattāmamauñcat (20.98)

acchedyobhedyo nityasamvitsukhātmā
nityāvayaya pūrṇaśaktiḥ sa krṣṇaḥ
ngirya taṁ devavahāḥ śataghniṁ
nityāśṛntodarśayacchāntavaccaḥ (20.99)

bāhūṁ varāṁ brahmaṇoṇvesamoghāṁ
moghaṁ vikṣya parātparēśāṁ
bhaveś kathāṁcit bahumānena yuktam
ityeva krṣṇadārśayacchāntavat svam (20.100)

tadā ṽṛptaṁ narakaṁ vikṣya devi
satyaṁ kārmukaṁ śāṅgasaṁjñāṁ
caṅkāra tam yatamānaṁ ca bhaumam
nirāyudhaṁ virathāṁ ca kṣāṇena (20.101)

āliṅgya krṣṇaḥ satyabhāmāṁ punaśca
tathāntare saṁsthitam bhaumamugram
ṣrjantamastrānyarāṁ nigṛtta-
kandham mrtyorpayāmāsā 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 18th century. The episode of Satyabhāmā fighting Narakāsura occurs in this work.
pintiriṁũu Garuḍan tadantare
Garuḍa turned back
Thereafter Mādhava fainted a little
Quickly, Satyabhāma came with the bow
To Naraka’s presence.

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

“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”

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 kṛṣṇah satyabhāmādvitiyakah
prāgyotiṣamuhkogacchad vāsavastridivaṁ yayau

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

sa yuddhyat kṛṣṇaniḵate kālikāṁ kālikopamāṁ
raktasayanayanāṁ dīrghāṁ khadgaśaktidharā tadā (102)
apaśyajjagatāṁ dhātriṁ kāmākhyamapi mohinām (103)
savismitastathā bhīlastāṁ drṣtvā jagatāṁ prasāṁ
yoddhayamityeva tadā gṛhyudhe narakāsuraḥ (104)

While fighting, he observed tall Kālikā by the side of Krṣṇa, 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 Krṣṇa 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 Krṣṇa when the latter was wounded from an arrow from Narakā. Krṣṇa 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 Narakā but does not say that Krṣṇa 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


[2] This is the maṅgala śloka of Pūrvabhārata Campu by Mānaveda. Published with the commentary Kṛṣṇiyam, by Dr. K. Raghavan Pillai, Kerala University, Anantaśayana Sainkṛta Grandhavali, No. 209. Published by Sriramavilasam Press, Kollam (1963).

[3] Kṛṣṇanāṭṭam, 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


[5] We thank Prof. Velcheru Narayana Rao for helpful communications.


[9] Information provided by Prof. Velcheru Narayana Rao.


[12] guruvāyumandira virociṣṇuḥ sa viṣṇuḥ svayam as Mānaveda says in the maṅgala śloka of Kṛṣṇagīti.


[16] yajñamārtiḥ purāṇātmā sāmamūrdhā ca pāvanaḥ
rgvedapakṣavān-pakṣī (3-76-3)

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

Figure 2: Garuḍa striking Narakaśura with wings.
Figure 3: Satyabhāmā takes up bow and arrow.

Figure 4: Satyabhāmā fighting Narakāsura.
Figure 5: Satyabhāmā fighting Narakaśura, another scene.

Figure 6: Kṛṣṇa presents a garland to Satyabhāmā.