



Kathakali Club Thrissur

Narakasuravadham

Aattakkadha written by
Karthika Thirunal Balarama Varma

Story summary

Narakasuravadham, written in the 18th century by Karthika Thirunal Balarama Varma — who was both a poet and an expert in dramatic arts — took shape in the Kalari of Kapplingadu. This is the form in which it is generally staged today. Narakasuravadham is presented in two parts. The first part features a Kathakali **Kathi vesham** called **Cheriya Narakasuran**. The one who appears in the second part is the **Valiya Narakaasuran**, which is a **Chuvanna Thadi vesham** in Kathakali.

The dramatic structure and technical richness of the play, along with the elaborate and gradual buildup of the invincible hero, and the wealth of character variety possible throughout the performance — these are the key elements that make the first part especially appealing as an ideal model.

Narakasuran, who used to abduct celestial women from heaven, sends a demoness named **Nakratundi**. (Nakratundi is not a historical/puranic character — she is a poetic creation of the author, similar to Lalitha in Kirmeeravadham). On the way to fulfill the task assigned by Narakasuran, Nakratundi, sees Jayanthan, the son of Indra, who is handsome, and becomes lovesick. She then takes the form of a beautiful woman, approaches him, and requests that he accept her.

Jayanthan rejects her romantic overtures. Enraged with the continuous rejection by Jayanthan, she reveals her own real form and tries to forcibly take him away. Jayanthan cuts off her ears, the tip of her nose and breasts and sends her away. Nakratundi, wailing loudly, goes to Narakasuran's kingdom and reports what happened.

Narakasuran consoles her and sets out for war, mobilizing his army and marching toward heaven. Upon reaching heaven, he defeats Indra in battle, and takes away the special/sacred garments of heaven and the earrings of Mother Aditi, and carries them back down to earth. The story is arranged so that the earlier scenes are omitted, and the performance begins from this point (Nakratundi's episode).



Scene 1 - Nakrathundi

After the **sloka** beginning with "**Kreedanthamalokya**," the **thiranokku** (curtain-look) of Nakratundi, shining/radiant with **Raudra bhava** (fury).

After the thiranokku, she stands up on the **peedham** (pedestal), looks to both sides, comes down, and pretends that her whole body has become unclean. She then adorns herself by applying **pottu** and doing **kannezhuthu** (eye-lining), indicating that she can play for a little while, and calls the women she sees nearby to play with her.

Seeing that they went away without agreeing, she performs **kummi** and **panthadi** alone, feigns tiredness, and fans herself with her **uthareeyam** (upper cloth) for a long while. Then, indicating that she must proceed to heaven as per her master's command, she sets out on her journey.

The **padam** beginning with "**Krurayakunna Nakratundi**." The first part of the padam describes Nakratundi as one with terrifying fangs, who kills enemy clans and drinks their blood, who wears lions as earrings, and who has a horrifying form. The padam ends with the lines "**Aho saphalam chinthitham**," indicating that she now sees the celestial women.

In the instrumental interlude of the padam, she walks back and forth behind the **thirasheela** (hand-held curtain), and occasionally, manifesting her Raudra form, comes to both sides of the curtain and roars. As the padam concludes, the curtain is removed, and she comes running in, acting as though she has entered heaven, and sees the beautiful **Nandanodyanam** (celestial garden) and the celestial women there.

The special stage technique of using the thirasheela to visualize Nakratundi's journey to heaven through the clouds is employed here. Such stage conventions greatly help to strengthen the presentational structure of Narakasuravadham.

Seeing the celestial women, she catches them one by one. Meanwhile, she sees Jayanthan, the son of Indra. Looking at him with amorous longing, she thinks of what means she could use to obtain him. Indicating that she will go to him having taken on a beautiful form, and as a sign of her transformation, holding the **sirovastram** (head-cloth) with both hands with feminine grace, in the manner of the **Lalitha vesham**, she sways it, and with delicate **padavinyasam** (footwork/gestures), she looks toward Jayanthan, acts out bashfulness, and exits the stage.



Scene 2 Jayanthan & Lalitha

After the slokam beginning with "**Itham nischithya hrutwa thridasapuravadhoorudhatam prasthitha sa**," Nakratundi enters in the **Lalitha vesham** and performs a beautiful **saree-nritham** (dance in feminine attire).

Against the melodious background of the **raga (Varali)** being sung, she holds the sirovastram and sways/leaps to both sides. Holding her hands in kamazhthippidichu (inverted grip), she moves them forward and backward, and in three kaalams (time-cycles), lowers her waist, sits low, and rises again.

She then moves into the padam beginning with "**Yaminee-chara-maanini**." As the dance concludes, she sees Jayanthan and acts out bashfulness — this leads into the padam "**Vritravairinandana**," set in Neelambari raga, in slow tempo (padinja kalam). The meaning is: "Seeing you, the son of Indra, gives me joy. By fate, I have been fortunate to gain a husband."

This is followed by Jayanthan's padam beginning with "**Aarayi**." To the question "Who are you?", Lalitha replies that she is neither a human woman nor a demoness, but a Devastree (celestial woman), and asks that he accept her. Jayanthan replies that he cannot marry except as per his father's command.

This is followed by Lalitha's beautiful charanam in **Thodi** raga beginning with "**Enankasamvadana**." Here, saying "Separation from you is truly unbearable," "**Nin virahammennal noonam Sahikkavathalle**..." Nakratundi approaches Jayanthan several times to embrace him, and Jayanthan evades her each time.

Hearing Jayanthan say, **ethrayum karna katoram edi kutrapi poka**... "You wretched one, so harsh to the ears, go away," Lalitha, in anger, reveals her Raudra form and declares, "I have come today to take you away" — at this point comes Jayanthan's padam "**Raathrinjaravanithe**."

Hearing Jayanthan say, "Demoness, release the celestial women," Nakratundi assumes her demoness form (the Kari vesham enters) and approaches Jayanthan. Jayanthan severs her ears the tip of her nose and breasts, and she exits the scene weeping.



Scene 3 Narakasuran & Narakasura patni

Jayanthan informs Indra of the demoness's story. After the slokam indicating the context — "At this time, in his palace, Narakasuran spoke thus to his wife" — comes **Narakasuran's thiranokku** in slow tempo (**padinja kalam**).

After the thiranokku, he enters embracing his wife. Lowering the curtain, he points out the garden with his eyes and asks, "My dear, shall we not go to the garden?" His wife agrees, and they enter the garden with playful, coy gestures (kida thakidam thalam).

The padam "**Baalikamar mouli baale**" in **Paadi raga**, in slow tempo. After the "look-around" (nökkikkanal) sequence performed in four tala cycles, the padam abhinaya begins.

*In slow-tempo padams, certain portions are usually elaborated in detail. Here, since it is a garden setting, upon seeing peacocks, the line "Have you seen the fine play of the Keki (peacocks)?" is the portion elaborated. The stage-action called **Keki** is enacted by depicting the movements of peacocks — pecking, spreading and flapping the wings, and so on — performed in **Chembada tala**, 16 counts. The following line, "The cuckoos and swans joyfully seek [each other]," is presented with an **iratti** (doubled rhythmic repetition) in 6-count tala.*

After Narakasuran's padam and his wife's reply, there is a brief aattam (enactment). Thinking to himself, "When I have a wife as beautiful as Goddess Lakshmi right beside me, why did I send the demoness Nakratundi to abduct celestial women?", he rises and stands embracing his wife — at that moment he hears a sound. He turns his neck and listens carefully. Indicating "whatever it may be, let it be," he embraces his wife again and stands as before.

Hearing the sound again, louder this time, he indicates "I must find out what this sound is," and sends his wife away to the antahpuram (inner chambers).

He then comes forward and wonders: What is this terrifying sound? Is it mountains colliding? No. (Enacting as Indra — a **pakarnnattam**, or transformation-enactment) — Indra, with his Vajrayudham (thunderbolt weapon), once severed the mountains' wings and cast them down to earth. So it is not the sound of mountains colliding.

Is it the sound of the sea's waters overflowing the shore? No. Long ago, sage Urva placed his son Badavanalan (the submarine fire) in the middle of the ocean to consume its rising waters. Therefore, it is not the sound of the sea overflowing its shores.

Indicating "I must find out what this sound is," he climbs onto the stool and, looking into the distance, sees Nakratundi approaching, drenched in blood, her ears, the tip of her nose and breasts severed. "Is this not Nakratundi, whom I sent to heaven? Yes, it is."



(There is a convention here where Nakratundi is made to physically appear, smeared with blood — called "**ninam**." There is also another tradition where, instead of a physical appearance of Ninam, her presence is conveyed through pakarnnattam by the same actor. Without descending into repulsiveness, and while sustaining the heroic sentiment [veeram], her presence is conveyed to the audience through measured bodily movement — this is the approach followed here.)

Acting as though the blood-drenched Nakratundi has arrived, he asks, "Who did this to you?" Noteworthy here is how the force of the word "who" in the question is expressed through a distinctive use of mudra placement.

Acting as though he hears her say, "Jayanthan, the son of Indra, did this to me," he consoles her, indicating that he will kill Jayanthan and give her his blood to drink, and sends her away.

Following this is the **padappurappadu** (war-preparation departure). He asks the charioteer (sootha) to bring the chariot. Upon seeing the chariot, he orders the army commander (senani) to bring the weapons. He examines each of the weapons and has them placed and secured in the chariot.

He then takes up his sword, wipes it, twirls it on both sides, tightens his waist-belt, and — in Thripuda tala, with the parunthukkal step — sets out for heaven along with his armies.

He opens the gates of heaven, looks around on both sides, and challenges Indra to battle. The padam beginning with "Sudhasanendra vada." (This was composed in parallel to Bheema's padam "Nishacharendra vada," addressed to Baka, in Kottayathu Thampuran's Bakavadham. Not only the wording, but also the tala measure of Chembada, 8 matra, the manner of presentation, and even the Aahari raga, have all been arranged following the corresponding padam in Bakavadham.)

Hearing the call to battle, Indra enters running; Narakasuran defeats him and sends him back. Here, Narakasuran, mocking Indra, often performs an aattam on the story of the curse of Ahalya, which is the reason Indra came to bear a thousand eyes (sahasraksha).

After Indra's padam beginning with "Danavaadhama," in the aattam that follows, Narakasuran wrestles (malpidutham) with Airavatham (Indra's elephant) and hurls it down.

He uproots the Kalpavriksham (celestial wish-fulfilling tree), gathers all the special/precious objects of heaven, cuts off the earrings from the ears of Aditi, the mother of the gods, takes possession of them, and sets out on his journey back to earth.

