



Study of Tales of Supernatural Powers from Select Revisionist Texts of The Ramayana and The Mahabharata

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Abstract

Nature is full of secrets, suspense, mystery as well as occult and celestial powers. It contains extraordinary powers also. Natural world possesses instinctive and innate behavior. Beyond this there are superpowers in nature. These powers cannot be explained by scientific logic or laws of nature. If we combine the two words Super + Nature, then this describes some extraordinary meaning. Now, let us analyze the word 'Supernatural'. The word Supernatural is a combination of two words, Super and Natural. It means the behavior, the powers, the nature or anything that contains some occult and phenomenal instinct. In the Hindu Vedas, Puranas and Upanishads we can see many examples of this extraordinary power. To explore the same, this paper uses references primarily from three revisionist texts – "Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana" by Dedutt Pattnaik, "The Palace of Illusions" by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and "Yagnaseni" by Pratibha Ray.

Keywords

supernatural, power, tapasya, siddhi, mantra, Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads, nature

Introduction

According to "Dictionary.com", the meaning of Supernatural is:

su·per·nat·u·ral

1. of, relating to, or being above or beyond what is natural;

2. unexplainable by natural law or phenomena; abnormal.
3. of, pertaining to, characteristic of, or attributed to God or a deity.
4. of a superlative degree; preternatural:
5. relating to, or attributed to ghosts, goblins, or other unearthly beings; eerie; occult
6. a being, place, object, occurrence, etc., considered as supernatural or of
7. supernatural origin; that which is supernatural, or outside the natural order.
8. behavior supposedly caused by the intervention of supernatural beings.
9. direct influence or action of a deity on earthly affairs.

According to "YourDictionary.com", the definition of Supernatural is:

1. The definition of supernatural is extraordinary or is something associated with forces we don't understand or that cannot be explained by science.
 - a. The existence of ghosts or witches is something that would be described as supernatural.
 - b. When someone is extremely strong and can lift up a car, this is an example of a person who would be described as having supernatural strength.
2. The supernatural is defined as events or things that can't be explained by nature or science and are assumed to come from beyond or originate from otherworldly forces.



According to Wikipedia, the definition of Supernatural is: The supernatural (Medieval Latin): supernaturalis: supra “above” + naturalis “natural”, first used: 1520-1530 (AD) includes all that cannot be explained by the laws of nature, including things characteristic of or relating to ghosts, gods, or other types of spirits and other non-material beings, or to things beyond nature.

Also, according to Wikipedia, the word Supernatural was invoked around 1520 AD, but in Hindu mythology this word has its own importance and dignity since long back and it has been present in all epics. Especially, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are replete with instances and events of supernatural powers and actions. In Hindu mythology, there are variety of Gods and Goddesses and only they have the power to give the blessings of supernatural powers to Rakshasas and to humans. To gain this power, one has to do Sadhana and *Tapasya*. If God is happy with the *Tapasya* then He will grant the blessings of supernatural powers to that person. Of the four Vedas, the Rigveda is overwhelmed with the incidents and examples of supernatural powers. In Puranas and Upanishads, the description of supernatural powers is available at a large scale. The attaining of perfection or accomplishment is termed as Siddhi. All religions accept the phenomenon of supernatural powers.

In the context of Indian mythological scriptures, there are eight main types of supernatural or yogic powers that can be acquired by any person through *Tapasya*, rigorous control of the mind, deep meditation and penance. These are: *Anima*, *Mahima*, *Garima*, *Laghima*, *Praapti*, *Praakamya*, *Ishitva* & *Vashitva*. There are other such powers too, however, these are the most important yogic powers. These eight super

powers or *Ashta Siddhis* are explained in brief below (web source: aumamen.com):

1. **Anima** is the ability to reduce the size of the body, even same or less than the size of an atom. For example, Hanuman reduced the size of his body while he was searching for Sita in Lanka. It is “Becoming smaller than the smallest” as Lord Krishna mentions in the Srimad Bhagavatam.
2. **Mahima** is the ability to acquire a gigantic form. It is “Becoming larger than the largest” as Lord Krishna mentions in the Srimad Bhagavatam. For example, Hanuman assumed a huge form to burn Lanka, as well as to fight Kumbhakarna. Another example is that as the *Vaamana* avatar, Lord Vishnu increased his form to such gigantic proportion that he covered all three worlds in just three steps.
3. **Garima** is the ability to become very heavy in weight by will. For example, When Bhima is climbing the *Gandha Madana* mountains to get *Saugandhika* flowers for Draupadi, he is stopped by a monkey (Hanuman) whose tail is lying in the way. Bhima orders the monkey to take the tail off the road, the monkey being old, tells him to move it himself, but Bhima couldn't lift the monkey's tail.
4. **Laghima** comes from the word *laghu*, which means small or light. **Laghima** is the ability to make the body very light. “Becoming lighter than the lightest”, as mentioned by Lord Krishna in the Srimad Bhagavatam. It can be applied for levitation or flying in the air.
5. **Praapti** is the ability to acquire anything anywhere. The word *Praapti* means 'to obtain', 'having obtained', 'to have got'.
6. The ability to obtain anything desired, the ability to have realized the dreams, is known as **Praakamya**.
7. **Isha** means lord and *ishitva* means lordship. Therefore, **Ishitva** is the ultimate power of absolute lordship over the entire creation.

8. **Vashitva** is the ability to have anything and everything under control, especially all the physical manifestations made up of the *panch-tatvas* or the five basic elements of life.

There are many supernatural powers mentioned in the Bhagavata Purana, such as:

- **Trikaala jnatvam**: To have, or acquire the knowledge of past, present and future
- **Advandvam** or **non-Duality**: It means not being subject to, or not being affected by the dualities of heat/cold, pain/pleasure, sweat/bitter, good/bad etc.
- **Para citta aadi abhijnata**: It is the ability of reading and knowing others' minds
- **Agni arka ambu visha aadinaam pratishtambhah**: The ability to control and neutralize the affects of fire, sun, water, or poison
- **Aparaajayah**: Power of becoming unconquerable
- **Anurmi-mattvam**: This power endows the capability of being undisturbed by hunger, thirst, and other body-generated cravings
- **Doora-shravana**: Ability to hear sounds or voices emanating from very far
- **Doora-darshanam**: Ability of seeing things or events happening very far, like the events and conversations on the battle ground clearly described by Sanjaya to the blind king Dhritrashtra
- **Manah-javah (Manojvitva)**: Ability to move the physical body wherever and whenever one wants
- **Kaama-roopam**: It is the power of attaining or assuming any desired form
- **Para-kaaya praveshanam (Vikranabhav)**: Ability of entering another person's body. It must be understood here that this power is different and far superior compared to the concept of ghost spirits that are believed to enter a person's physical body with a weak astral body

- **Sva-chhanda mrityuh**: The ability to die or leave the physical body only on one's wish. Examples to illustrate this power are that of Bhishma from *Mahabharata*, and that of many sages who left their bodies by their own wish
- **Devaanam saha kridaa anudarshanam**: This is the power to witness the pastimes of demi-gods or like the gods, witnessing the events of the three worlds
- **Yathaa sankalpa samsiddhih**: The power of achieving anything as one determines
- **Prakhya Siddhi**: Ability to choose the womb to be born in, before birth
- **Surya Vijnan**: Transforming one material into another by the use of sun rays
- **aajna apratihataa gatih**: This power makes one's commands unstoppable.

There are various other powers mentioned in various texts as well as times and places such as – control over natural phenomena like raining, sunrise, sunset; memories of past lives; power of levitation, clairvoyance; bi-location or multi-location presence at the same time; powers of using and controlling many things and events in special ways by manipulating the inherent characteristics of elements like, earth, fire, water, wind, light, sky, and even various colors (web source: aumamen.com).

Methods to attain Supernatural powers:

There are numerous methods for attaining supernatural powers, some of those are mentioned by Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutra* – Chapter 4: Verse 1

Janma aushadhi mantra tapah samaadhijah siddhayah

English translation

Through Birth, medicine (drugs/herbs), mantra (incantations), penance (self-discipline) and Samadhi – the Supernatural powers are born



As stated in the verse, following are the methods, as described by Patanjali, to attain supernatural powers:

- **By Birth:** Those born of spiritually advanced parents receive the powers through birth because of the high sanctity of the womb they are born in as well as the superior levels of the genes. In some way, we can also ascribe these supernatural powers by birth because of their attainments in the previous lives of the person that is being born.
- **By Medicine:** The thorough understanding of some special and rare medicinal plants and herbs as well as the knowledge of how to prepare and use these special drugs (or herbal concoctions) provide some miraculous powers. These powerful medicines can be used for extraordinary healing or physical enhancements. In the *Ramayana*, there is this episode when the *Sanjeevni-Booti* herb is brought by Hanuman to bring back Laxman to life.
- **By Mantras:** Mantras are syllables or words written in a very specific manner. Incantation of these mantras with focus and concentration enables in gaining powers by the person chanting them. The *Vedas* describe many such mantras that need to be chanted verbally in a specific way. This is because mantras are based on, and use, the power of sounds (spoken word). Mantras also require lot of self-discipline.
- **By Penance:** Self-disciplining by righteous and pure mind is believed to clean and purify oneself so that one is able to control things just by her/ his wish.
- **Samadhi:** The ultimate pinnacle of meditative contemplation, the achievement of oneness with the consciousness. When this stage is attained, a person automatically acquires extraordinary or supernatural powers.

Most of the revisionist writers of contemporary times have not explained the

incidents of supernatural powers in their works. They have extracted only important incidents that mention about supernatural powers. The two great epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* describe the two most important and powerful Yugas – *Tretayug* and *Dwaparyug*. *Ramayana* is the story of *Tretayug* and *Mahabharat* is about *Dwaparyug*. The birth of Sita and Draupadi is also supernatural. Sita is born out of earth, whereas Draupadi is born through fire. Devdutt Pattanaik describes in *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*:

“Suddenly the King stopped. The furrow revealed a golden hand: tiny fingers rising up like a grass, as if drawn by the sunshine. Janaka moved the dirt away, and found hidden within the soft, moist earth a baby girl, healthy and radiant, smiling joyfully, as if waiting to be found.” (*Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, pp. 9)

In the same unnatural way Draupadi is gifted by Holy Fire. As Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has explained the birth of Draupadi through Dhai Ma in *The Palace of Illusions*:

“Behold, we give you this girl, a gift beyond what you asked for. Take good care of her, for she will change the course of history.” (*The Palace of Illusions*, pp. 4-5)

In *Yajnaseni*, Draupadi tells about her birth: “My birth? But my birth was an exception. I was born nubile. The sacrificial alter is my mother. Yajnasena is my father. So, I am Yajnaseni.” (*Yajnaseni*, pp. 5)

There are many characters in Hindu epics who have unequalled supernatural powers. In *Ramayana* Shri Ram, Sita, Hanuman, Bali, Ravana, Meghnad, Kumbhakaran, Surpanakha, Taadka, Mareecha, Ahiravan and many other characters attain some kind of super powers. They displayed or used their super power

anywhere and anytime. It is said that Ram is the avatar of Lord Vishnu, then definitely He possesses extreme power and Sita is the avatar of Goddess Lakshmi so she also has superpower. We can see her power when she lifts up the *Shiv-Dhanush* effortlessly. Devdutt Pattanaik describes:

“The bow of Shiva was so heavy that even a dozen men could not pick it up. So it was hauled on to a cart and taken to the armory of Mithila where it was kept, admired from a distance by all the warriors who passed through the land..... ‘That’s too heavy’, said one of the maids, ‘no man can pick it up’.

‘Still it needs to be cleaned’, said Sita, effortlessly picking up the bow with one hand and vigorously wiping its undersurface with the other.

News of this amazing feat reached the King and the Queen.

‘She is too strong. Who will marry her now? Wondered her mother with a smile on her face but concern in her heart.’ (*Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, pp. 46-47)

In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology is one of the finest collections of works on Sita by Malashri Lal and Namita Gokhale. It is the constructive corpus of worthy writers. Various articles in the book are on the supernatural power of Sita.

In one of them, Devdutt Pattnaik has picked up one example from ‘Adbhut Ramayan’, to express the variety of super powers of Sita. He writes:

“Ravana attacked Ayodhya. All the men tried to destroy this demon but were unable to do so. Finally, it is revealed that only a chaste woman could destroy this demon and save the city. All the women of the city were asked to fight the demon but none were able to defeat him. Finally, Sita was called, and she transformed herself into Kali and destroyed the demon as easily as a child breaks a twig. As

Kali she was so frightening that Ram begged her to return to her original state – that of Sita.....” (*In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology*, pp. 18-19)

From the same book, the article of Ranga Rao, “R.K. Narayan’s *Ramayana*”, describes the purity cum superpower of Sita, where she was asked to give agni-pareeksha in front of a large crowd after defeating Ravana. In these lines Narayan writes:

“The flame rose to the height of a tree, still Rama made no comment. He watched as Sita approached the fire, prostrated herself before it, and said, ‘O Agni, great God of fire, be my witness’. Sita jumped into the fire. From heart of the flame rose God of the fire, bearing Sita, and presented her to Rama with words of blessing.” (*In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology*, pp. 32)

Though Hanuman is a *Vaanar*, yet he is blessed with supreme power from all mighty Gods. He can fly, change his body size in any shape. He even grabbed Lord Sun in his mouth. In the revisionist writing of Devdutt Pattanaik, Hanuman tells his story to Sita:

“I was a strong child, so strong that I did not know my strength. Once, I leapt up into the sky to eat the rising sun, assuming it to be a fruit. I began tossing the planets around like stars.....”

Hanuman then told Sita of his journey across the vast sea. He first increased the size of his body. The branches of trees with leaves, fruits and flowers clung to his limbs as he grew in size. His head stretched beyond the sky and the planets wondered whether they had to go around his head or around the Sun. Under his weight the mountains by the seaside started oozing liquid metal like the juice of crushed sugarcane. Then with a thunderous roar, he leapt into the sky and made his way south towards Lanka.” (*Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, pp. 190-191)



“Hanuman then scoured the mountain for the herb The Devas watched in amazement as Hanuman increased his size and then proceeded to uproot the entire mountain, balance it in the palm of one hand and leap up into the sky making his way southwards, the sun trapped in his armpit.” (*Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, pp. 228)

There are many stories regarding his powerful actions. Same with Bali (king of Kishkindha), he has power that no one can defeat him. If anyone comes in front of him to fight, Bali can obtain half of his rival’s power without any effort automatically. One of them is Neel, who has the power that if he touches anything it will float on the water. And so, he helped to make the bridge from Rameshwarm to Lanka with heavy rocks floating on the sea water. Angad, the son of Bali, is so strong and powerful that no one can lift his leg, not even Ravana can do it. Even Ravana is endowed with enormous supernatural powers. He has defeated gods and snatched their properties but no one can do anything against him because he also has the supernatural power to destroy even the earth.

In the context of *Mahabharata*, we can say that the characters are more human than the characters of *Ramayana*. In *Mahabharata*, Shri Krishna has extra supernatural powers and there are many incidents that show his extraordinary powers. Though the birth of the *Pandavas* and *Kauravas* are not natural, they are not stronger than Shri Krishna. Divakaruni speaks through Draupadi in her revisionist work *The Palace of Illusions*,

“There were other stories about Krishna. How he’d been born in a dungeon where his uncle Kamsa had imprisoned his parents with the intention of killing him at birth. How, in spite of many prison guards, he had been miraculously spirited away to safety in Gokul

.... How in infancy, he killed a demoness who tried to poison him with her breast milk. How he lifted the Mount Govardhan to shelter his people from a deluge that would have drowned them People loved to exaggerate, and there was nothing like dose of the supernatural to spice up the drudgery of facts.” (*The Palace of Illusions*, pp. 10)

In her book, Divakaruni openly describes about a sorceress who comes to teach Draupadi the household activities as well as how to live happy in all situations. There is a conversation between the sorceress and Draupadi thus: “As you see”, the sorceress said, “women contribute to the world’s problems in a hundred insidious ways. And you, who will be more powerful than most, could wreak greater havoc if you aren’t careful” (*The Palace of Illusions*, pp. 66)

She tells Draupadi about the secret of Kunti. She tells, “In her youth, the sorceress told me, Kunti was given a boon by the irascible sage Durvasa, whom she’d managed somehow to please. Whenever she wanted, she could call upon a god and he would gift her with a son. It was a strange boon, not without its drawbacks, but it came in handy when her husband Pandu couldn’t provide her with children. Thus her eldest, Yudhishtir, was a son of the god of righteousness, her second, Bheem, the son of the god of wind, and Arjun, the son of Indra the King-god Nakul and Sahdev, sons of the twin healer-gods were born.”

“Do you believe that men can be born from gods?” I asked.

She gave me a look, “as much they can be born from fire!”

(*The Palace of Illusions*, pp. 63)

When Draupadi, being lost by Pandavas in the game of dice, was dragged to the assembly by Dushshasan for *cheer-haran*, at that time another supernatural incident occurred. When



Dushshasan pulls the cloth around her body to humiliate her and the Pandavas, Lord Krishna, through His supernatural power, makes the cloth ever lasting, in fact unending, to everyone's astonishment.

Another example of supernatural power:

Since king Dhritrashtra was blind, his wife Gandhari also took the pledge of not to see the world and so she wrapped her eyes and blindfolded herself. Due to this devotion to her husband and the strong will power, she attained a supernatural power to give extreme strength to Duryodhana to make him more powerful. When Duryodhana was the only one left in the war, all his brothers being killed, Gandhari asks him to come in front of her completely naked. Gandhari tells him that after many years she will remove the veil from her eyes and the first thing will see him naked. Just by seeing him, through her *Divya-Drishti*, endows extreme strength to her son.

The Hindu mythological epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, are replete with numerous instances of the use of special and powerful weapons of mass destruction in the epic battles, weapons that are loaded with unimaginable destructive powers on a global scale, and even celestial scale. These weapons are invoked and controlled by the supernatural powers of the particular warrior by chanting of special mantras. Using the supernatural powers attained by mantras, these weapons can be launched by the mind, from the eyes, by words, or by a bow and arrow. The mantras transformed and controlled the normal or simple arrows into the most powerful weapons. The *Sudharshan Chakra*, used by lord Krishna is a boomerang type of special lethal weapon that returns back after incurring the damage to the desired target. The *Brahmastra* is one of the most powerful weapons that is comparable to the nuclear weapons of modern times. The

Pashupatastra is incredibly destructive and capable of destroying the entire creation. The *Agneyastra* or *Agnibaan* (arrow) is capable of generating huge fires, the *Nagastra* (arrow of snakes) is capable of inflicting heavy damage. Even a single arrow, transforms into a cluster of multiple or numerous arrows that can kill many persons at the same time. There are various other weapons with specific capabilities and destructive mechanisms. All these are acquired or attained with the help of supernatural powers that in turn are learnt or attained by rigorous *tapasya* and deep meditation. In order to attain and retain as well as wield these *astras* or supernatural powers, there are also specific conditions that need to be fulfilled. A warrior must have the capability and knowledge required to arm, control and disarm the supernatural weapon. This knowledge or power comes either in the form of mantras and meditation. Some of these weapons are acquired directing from its presiding deity. Certain *astras* or weapons are given by the gods or deities but also require knowledge of mantras in order to use them properly and effectively.

Various saints whom we read of in our day to day life, like, Gautam Buddha (c. 563 BCE/480 BCE – c. 483 BCE/400 BCE), Mahavir (6th century BC), Ramakrishna Paramhansa (18 February 1836 – 16 August 1886), Swami Vivekananda (12 January 1863 – 4 July 1902), and so on were aware of this power. Everyone knows about these godly personalities and their heavenly qualities of body & mind control as well as their spiritual achievements and accomplishments.

This scholar would like to describe some great and heart-touching incidents from the great saint, Swami Ramakrishna Paramhansa's life. The book *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* by Christopher Isherwood, is very lively and

great work on the life of Ramakrishna. In the section ‘The Vision of Kali’, the writer has described the inner restlessness and sufferings of Ramakrishna when his spiritual efforts became more intense and he was going mad for the ‘Darshan’ of Goddess Kali. One day he decided to end his life and suddenly, in Swamiji’s own words, “.... I had a marvelous vision of the Mother, and fell down unconscious And what I saw was an infinite shoreless sea of light; a sea that was consciousness. However far and in whatever direction I looked, I saw shining waves, one after another, coming towards me. They were raging and storming upon me with great speed.... He’d get up reeling from the worshipper’s seat, climb on to the altar, and caress the Divine Mother, chucking her affectionately under the chin. He’d begin singing, laughing, joking and talking with Her, or sometimes he’d catch hold of Her hands and dance ... offering cooked food to the Divine Mother.” (*Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, pp. 65, 67). In fact, he had attained such an astonishingly high spiritual level that he would see and feel the Divine Mother Kali.

In the last moments of his life he wanted to handover all his powers to Narendra (Swami Vivekananda). Isherwood writes, “Gazing fixedly at Naren, he passed into Samadhi. Naren felt that a force, somewhat like an electric current, was taking possession of his body; slowly, he lost consciousness. When he came to himself again, he found Ramakrishna weeping. ‘Oh, Naren,’ he said, ‘I’ve just given you everything I have – and now I’m as poor as a beggar! But these powers that I’ve handed over to you will make you able to do great things in the world. When all that is accomplished, you can go back where you came from.’” (*Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, pp. 303)

To sum up, it may be highlighted that other religious texts, like the *Bible* and *Quran* are also full of such supernatural characters and powers. Most of the religions of the world believe that a human has the power to change or enhance his/her inherent energies or strengths into supernatural powers. It totally depends on the person how they can achieve it. Such powers are summarized in the following poem in the words of this scholar,

*Nature is mysterious, beautiful, amazing but pure and natural,
Human’s nature is the same but can’t behave purely natural,
They are greedy to get, to find and to earn more and more,
For that reason, they increase their tenure.
Why not they satisfied how much they get?
Still struggling for their life to be set,
They are not following the nature, becoming the tycoon,
Obstinate, depraved and evangelist of curse and boon.
God bless us with natural power,
Don’t forget your originality for a single hour,
Try to obtain HIS blessing’s shower,
Definitely, You will get Supernatural Power.*

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