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Understanding Saturn: The Gaze of the Planet at Pattanaik's *Draupadi*

Vidya Shetty

Research Scholar (Ph.D.)

&

Dr. Payel Dutta Chowdhury

Professor & Director

School of Arts & Humanities

REVA University

Bengaluru, KN

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Abstract:

“In all systems of astrology, Saturn has played a role disproportionate to the fact that it is only one of nine planets. In India, as in the West, Saturn - Shani in Sanskrit - has long been the harbinger of doom. In India, where astrology is used nearly exclusively for predictive purposes, a great deal of thought has been expended on Shani's malefic possibilities and how to attenuate them.” (Svoboda viii) The role of these Nine Planets and especially that of Saturn thus cannot go unnoticed in the lives of mythological characters either. Pattanaik, in his book *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, begins with the story of the Devas and talks about *Chandra-vamsis*, descendants of the Moon, of the *Budh-vamsis*, descendant of Mercury, of the *Surya-vamsis*, descendants of the Sun (Pattanaik 14) and connects them with both the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. This reinstates the fact that planets play a crucial role in the lives of the characters of the *Mahabharata* too. Pattanaik goes further to explain the concept of ‘*paap* and *punya*’ and of boons and curses that generate fortune or misfortune in the lives of the characters of these two great Epics (Pattanaik 14). Elaborating on this string of thought, he ventures into Indian Astrology and talks about how the attributes of these planets and their traits influence the behaviour of the kings. Surprisingly, throughout the book *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, he refrains from talking about the influence of these planets on the personalities of the women characters like Gandhari, Kunti or Draupadi who play an equally important role in the *Mahabharata*. This paper will string together the attributes and influence of the Nine Planets as seen in the life of Pattanaik's Draupadi with focus on his book *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*. It will further explore how willingness to suffer, which was then considered the hallmark of a King alone in a male-dominated world has resulted in Draupadi's suffering in *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* being given less importance.

Keywords: Nine Planets, Grahas, Astrology, Feminism, Male-centred, Gender, Saturn, Horoscope.

Interestingly, all the Nine Planets or the *Grahas* in Vedic Astrology are Male: be it the Sun, the Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn or Rahu and Ketu. All these planets have various roles to play in the lives of Gods and Kings, Asuras or Devas, be it in the life of Shiva, Vishnu, Rama or Ravana. Surprisingly, the lives of Sita or Draupadi has not been influenced by any of these *Grahas* or none have considered it important to connect their lives with either the malefic planets or the benefic planets and their influence on their emotions, actions or karma. Of the Nine Planets in Vedic Astrology, the role played by Saturn is the most important for he is considered the most dangerous of all the Nine Planets. Indian stories talk about the influence of Saturn in the life of King Harishchandra and also King Vikramaditya. However, very little is written about the influence of Saturn in the life of a Draupadi. Were all her sufferings, her misery, her wrangling in life not worth being considered of value when compared to the Pandava and Kuru Kings and Princes or was it taken for granted that as a woman her suffering or torment cannot be paid any importance to? Taking up difficult tasks, being banished to the forests, exile, war were highlights of a male-centred tale. In this context of the sexual bifurcation of tasks and labour, Nivedita Menon aptly sums it as, "Women are responsible for housework; that is, for the reproduction of labour power. The labour that goes into making people capable of working day after day (food, clean homes, clean clothes, rest) is provided by women. The woman of the house is expected either to perform these tasks herself, or be responsible for ensuring that a low-paid poorer woman does it." (Menon 11). A conservative approach towards harder tasks being the priority of men alone prevails in society to this day. Could this be the reason why Pattanaik underplays the role of Draupadi being able to withstand and conquer all travails without complaining or blaming which enables her emerge a heroine stronger than her male counterparts in *Jaya*? Talking about Kings and the Kuru Princes, he talks about how their behaviour is influenced by the movement of the planets and of their influence in their lives and also their behaviour as he writes, "The story of the star-goddess' tryst with the moon-god attempts to explain the behaviour of lunar kings through *Jyotish-shastra*, or Vedic astrology. Moon is associated with emotions, Jupiter with rationality and Mercury with clarity, communication and cunning. The story suggests that the *Chandra-vamsis* were by nature rather emotional, a trait that needed to be contained by logic." (Pattanaik 14).

Of the lines of the *Shani Chalisa* when translated to English read thus

Oh, Shani Maharaj, the gracious one!

Listen to my prayers, you who are the victorious one!!

Bestow your grace and protect us all!

Keep all your devotees modest and pure!!

(*Shri Shani Chalisa*)

A slow moving planet when compared to the other Planets, Saturn has been considered to be the most dreaded planet of all. Story of his birth has it that Saturn is the son of the Sun and his wife Samjna's shadow, Chaya. Story also has it that as soon as Saturn or *Shani* was born 'his gaze fell on his father and caused vitiligo'. (Svoboda 88) Such is believed is the power of Saturn that he spares no one be it Lord Shiva or Lord Vishnu. *Kundali* or the Astrological chart or Horoscope, which most Hindus believe in and which forms an integral part of the understanding of Vedic Astrology has in it that Saturn's movement across your birth chart determines your fortune or misfortune. Pattanaik makes a reference to the movement of these planets and their influence in *Jaya* and goes a step further to distinguish between '*Rashi* and *Nakshatra*' as he writes, "The Sanskrit *Mahabharata* makes no reference to the *Rashi* or the Zodiac, the twelve solar houses of astrology. It refers only to *Nakshatra*, the twenty-seven lunar houses of astrology. Scholars conclude that *Nakshatra* is native to India while *Rashi* came from the West, perhaps Babylon." (Pattanaik xv) The Epic thus had references to the Nine Planets, to Kundalis and to the *Nakshatras*. Infact Parikshit in Pattanaik's *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* is well aware of the fact that he was cursed to die of snake bite. Readings evidently of his Horoscope, Rituals and cosmic forces determined his death of a snake-bite. Pattanaik brings this out beautifully in the book as he traces the history of the Ancestors of Janamajeya to the Devas and the Nine Planets also known as the *Nava-grahas*.

Whomsoever (you cast your dristhi, sight),

you become pleased, but ones (excepting your devotees) !

Granting your grace, you protect them hence!!

You can turn down one from the heights of sky!

Or even can raise him from Earth to Sky!!

(*Shri Shani Chalisa*)

As Pattanaik builds on the retelling of the *Mahabharata* in *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, he moves onto the birth of the Pandavas. Pandu's impotency is well camouflaged by Pattanaik in the book like the other retellings of the *Mahabharata*. In the forests, Pandu's hunting spree and accidental killing of Kindama and his curse on Pandu, twists the entire story of *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*. At this point, it is Kunti, who is an unwed mother, who comes to Pandu's rescue as she consoles him and there is a reference made to Mercury and Jupiter, both the *Grahas*. It is Kunti who reveals to him about the magic mantra that she was in possession of and of how she could invoke the Gods to give her a child. Pandu would thus become the father of these children. Pandu willingly agrees to this option and also goes greedy as he keeps asking her to invoke other Gods and ask for more sons. Kunti is aware of the fact that she had already used the mantra once and invoked the Sun, the most powerful of the Planets and from him was born Karna. She chooses to share this mantra with Madri and let her invoke the Gods for she is well aware of the rules prevalent then that she could be called a 'whore' if she were to have more than four men. Pattanaik logically brings out the status of women in society and the application of the Vedic marriage rites as he refers to these social rules prevalent in the society then. The examples that he cites to substantiate how Kunti's decision to stop the invocation of the Gods after the birth of Arjuna and share the magical chant with Madri is brought out by Pattanaik as he writes, "As per some Vedic marriage rites, a woman is first given in marriage to the romantic moon-good, Chandra, then to the highly sensual Gandharva named Vishwasu, then to the fire-god, Agni, who cleanses and purifies all things, and finally to her human husband. Thus the 'four men' quota is exhausted. Clearly this was an attempt of society to prevent Hindu women from remarrying." (Pattanaik 48) What is of prime importance here is the logic that Kunti shares with Pandu of how Mercury, the planet, though fathered by the Moon is considered the son of Jupiter, the Planet. It is clear that the role of the *Grahas* and the Elements of Nature shadowed the story of the *Mahabharata* and beliefs in *Grahas* were prevalent then. What needs to be focussed on at this point is that Kunti's sons, the Pandavas, were born unnaturally and born out of invocation to the various Devas. Is this why they have no *kundalis* or horoscopes that would predict the movement of the *Grahas* in their chart? Surprisingly, Pattanaik, touches on these strands of the story in *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, but chooses not to dwell further on the play of the *Grahas* in the lives of the Pandavas and the life of Draupadi. Was it fear of the unknown or the lack of effort to dwell further on the role of the *Grahas*, that he chooses not to study this further in his book? The story con-

tinues to have references to so many sages and Gurus like Vyasa, Kripa, Drona and the like who were more than advisors to the Kings and were also Spiritual Gurus to these Kings. Why did they not study this further or somewhere along did these tales ignore the play of the Nine Planets in the lives of the Pandavas and the Kurus. *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* has references to the Vedic times and to the practice of how Kings in those times always had a sage as a guide to them and these sages advised them on all matters of political and religious importance and Pattanaik stresses on this in the book as he pens, “In Vedic times, all kings were expected to have by their side a sage who advised them on ritual, spiritual, occult as well as political matters. Jupiter or *Brihaspati* served as the guru to Indra, king of the Devas. Venus or *Shukra* served as Guru to Bali, king of the Asuras.” (Pattanaik 89) The birth of Gandharis’ children also has shades of ocultury and magical rituals linked. Likewise, is the birth of Draupadi. Born out of the flames like her brother Dhrishtadyumna, her birth is equally magical in nature. This explains why they had no *kundalis* or horoscopes either. From here emerged the connect to the Swayamvara, for the woman chose her husband and there was no matching of the *kundalis* or horoscopes or the influence of the *Grahas* on their lives; but sheer might and valour that decided the alliance of the prince and the princess involved. The mangling of the lives of the Pandavas and Draupadi begins from here. This is where the play of Saturn begins, his *Dristi* or gaze is cast on these characters.

Lord Rama was sent to exile instead getting a kingdom!

Through deranging 'Mother Kaikeyi',

King Dasaratha's wife!!

In the woods he saw a deer, the illusory one!

This way, Sita (Mother Janaki,

embodiment of prakriti, nature) was stolen!!

You made Rama's brother Lakshmana faint!

The whole army became frightened!

No sooner did Bajrang Bali (Sri Hanuman) invade Lanka!

The Golden Lanka was turned to ruins!!

(*Shri Shani Chalisa*)

It is believed and understood that Saturn’s nature is to give problems to man and curtail their arrogance. It was arrogance in Draupadi at the Swayamvara as Pattanaik projects in his book, that she rejects Karna on the grounds that his social status is not known. It is gener-

ally believed that Saturn "...controls and checks human nature, never tolerates arrogance and irresponsible behaviour, punishes people who go wrong and prevents bad behaviour which no other planet does." (Kumar 276) Draupadi's sorrows and miseries begin from here. Her prejudice against Karna's clan has to be punished and that makes her select the priests in disguise, who take her home to their Mother, triumphantly as Arjuna announces to his mother that he has won her in a tournament. During her Swayamvara, she had made up her mind that she would marry only Arjuna, the mighty Pandava as she discloses her mind to Krishna. Though story has it that her birth was to change the world and bring good in the place of evil, she is clear in her mind that her heart lies with Arjuna. That she rejects and insults Karna in the assembly for his low birth is not pardonable by Saturn. Pattanaik's book has this section titled with a caption that reads, "Janamejaya, in your family, a mother asked her son to share a wife." (Pattanaik 84) Saturn is also called '*dukha karaka graha*' (Kumar 276) and hence the miseries and troubles begin for Draupadi. Her arrogance is curtailed but so is the arrogance of Arjuna who looks at his wife as a trophy won in a tournament. The grace of Saturn it is believed makes people happy, while his wrath makes people unhappy and ruins them. Draupadi's happiness after the swayamara is short-lived as she enters the hut in the forests with the five princes and also ends up marrying all of them. Her entry into their lives is auspicious as the Pandavas are able to claim their destiny and they are given Khandava-prastha by Dhritarashtra. The Pandavas are also strengthened politically by the fact that Draupadi's father, Drupad, becomes a powerful ally of the Pandavas. Dhritarashtra agrees to give them the land on which the Pandavas with the help of Krishna set up Indra-prastha. Where Draupadi's entry into the lives of the Pandavas is considered auspicious, from thereon begins the division of the lands and the fight between the Kurus and the Pandavas. While at Indra-prastha when Duryodhana slips and falls into the pond, Draupadi laughs at the sight and comments, "The blind son of blind parents." (Pattanaik 133) Pattanaik asks whether these insensitive comments of Draupadi led to her humiliation later in life. Saturn is the only planet who checks arrogance and disciplines people and from here begins her disciplining by Saturn. It is correctly said that "Forbearance is the greatest quality of Saturn." (Kumar 276) If not for this check by Saturn on human nature, there would be no control on mankind at all.

In the *Ramayana*, the *kundali* or the horoscope of Lord Rama is clear as he has a natural birth and is born of King Dasharatha and Queen Kaushalya; while the *kundali* of Sita is not known as she is found by Janaka in the forest. Saturn does not spare even Lord Rama as he is sent into exile by his father on the words of his wife Kaikeyi. Saturn is said to be harsh where he needs to be and where he feels the need to discipline one and hence, Svoboda writes

in his narrative on Saturn's life as he speaks to King Vikramaditya, "O King! When I waylaid Shri Ramachandra, the incarnation of God Himself, He was sent to exile in the forest, and when I accosted Ravana, Shri Ramachandra and Lakshmana collected an army, invaded Lanka, killed Ravana, and destroyed his entire family." (Svoboda 107) Draupadi's misfortune also has her go into exile with her husbands. Her laughter had angered both Duryodhana and Karna and her marriage and life with the Pandavas apart from the support from her father to the five Princes, had made her a target in the eyes of the Kauravas. Pattanaik's next section in *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* reads: "Janamejaya, in the forest, your once prosperous ancestors lived in poverty and were repeatedly humiliated and humbled." (Pattanaik 151)

King Harish Chandra in your dasha period!

Lost all his belongings and his wife got sold!!

And he himself had to do menial work!

At a low caste sweeper's house!!

(*Shri Shani Chalisa*)

Yudhisthira gambles away his wife in the game of dice, which was in those times considered sacred. Pattanaik records this in his book thus: "In Vedic times, gambling with dice was considered a sacred ritual. Gambling showed if a king was blessed with intelligence and luck. Krishna embodies intelligence and Draupadi luck. Thus the Vedic game of dice was not just a game but a representation of life controlled by fate and free will." (Pattanaik 144) Draupadi's luck fails as she is lost by her husband to the most dreaded Kurus, who she had once humiliated and with Karna watching her shame. Her arrogance and ego is shattered. Saturn makes her understand life and its turmoils thereon as she follows her husbands to the forest. In astrology, Saturn or Shani represents "litigations, misunderstandings, squabbles, property disputes" (Kumar 278) and the "position of Saturn in a house indicates how good or bad the Dasha of Saturn will be. During his Dasha, Saturn gives anything good or bad in abundance beyond the bounds of limits, while there are limitations to other planets." (Kumar 279) It is Saturn who teaches endurance and humility to the Pandavas and Draupadi while they are in the forests. It is believed that Yudhisthira obtained the *Akshayapatra* (the never empty pot) after pleasing the Sun. It is this *Askhayapatra* that supports the Pandavas and Draupadi while they are in the forests. Pattanaik brings this out beautifully in his book and also draws the readers' attention to the fact that it is the same Draupadi who had insulted the

son of the Sun, Karna, on being from a lower caste during her swayamvara. Saturn himself is a Shudra when it comes to comparing caste by Draupadi. So Saturn is both a friend and foe. He denies but at the same time provides what is necessary. A description of Saturn reads thus - "He represents servant, slim and tall body, big nose, looks dirty, unhygienic, perspiring and smelling, bad odour, ugly haired, lot of hair all over the body, having very thick and rough looking nails, looking old, lame and disfigured limbs." (Kumar 278)

Your transiting over the rashi of Lord Shiva!

His wife got Sati (incinerated in a fire)

that badly hurt Lord Shiva!!

When you looked at Ganesha, the Lord!

His head did fly to the height of sky!!

When the Pandava brothers passed your dasha period!

Only Draupadi (their wife) was sold - nothing was spared!!

Even the Kauravas (evil minded opponents

of the Pandava brothers) lost all their wisdom!

And the Mahabharata (great war of India) had to be fought!!

(Shri Shani Chalisa)

It is believed that Saturn did not spare the Almighty Lord Shiva either. Story has it that Saturn informed Shiva one morning that he would enter his life and stay with him. Listening to this, Shiva jumped into the river Ganga and remained there for seven and a half years. When he emerged, he asked Saturn as to what could he do to him and Saturn replied to him saying that Shiva who was the 'Lord of the Three Worlds' had to hide under water out of fear for Saturn which speaks for itself about the gaze of Saturn. King Vikramaditya also faces the wrath of Saturn as he goes into oblivion and disappears from his kingdom to go through a life of turbulence and toil. On Vikramaditya's travails Ramanujan comments, "Women are no more than pawns or prizes or helpers in his life's game. His antagonists tend to be male, though a stepmother or ogress might also want to get rid of him. The story usually ends with a wedding." (Svoboda 265) The most poignant part of the story of Draupadi is in Pattanaik's book wherein she admits a secret unlike Kunti who never reveals to her husband about her being an unwed mother. Draupadi breaks down in the forest one night as she admits "I love Karna. I regret not marrying him on account of his caste. If I had married him, I would not have been gambled away. I would not have been publicly humiliated. I would not have been called a whore." (Pattanaik 184) Saturn makes her forget her ego - "Saturn is always a friend

and he makes one to realise various aspects of life by inflicting suffering and he is a great master in that angle.” (Kumar 276) Intelligent and skilled people like the Pandavas are also victims in the hands of Saturn as he makes them fools and helpless as they lose their wife in the game of dice. Pattanaik titles one section as ‘Hiding’ in *Jaya: An Illustrated Reading of the Mahabharata* and writes: “Janamejaya, once kings and gamblers, your ancestors were reduced to servants, stripped of all identity and respect”. (Pattanaik 193) In the thirteenth year of the exile of the Pandavas, they were forced to disguise themselves as servants seeking employment in the court of Virata. Saturn is considered a servant. The lessons he teaches Draupadi as a servant is a learning experience. Draupadi becomes Sairandhri and presents herself as a beautician to Sudeshna, the wife of Virata. Her beauty attracts Kichaka to her, who humiliates her as an arrogant maid and an object that would satisfy his desire. Though this action of his results in his death at the hands of Bhima, Draupadi has to go through a lot of humiliation as a servant.

As a mother, Draupadi is forced to keep her children away from her, and ultimately she loses all her children to the cruel war. Saturn searches for the weakness in her personality and exposes them and ensures that her ego is crushed. At the mercy of Saturn, she has no control over her destiny as she moves from being a Queen to being in exile, in disguise as a servant and as a pillar of support in the battlefield to the men of her lives. Draupadi experiences all the Saturnian qualities in her life. Her fate is changed by Saturn as she enters the life of the Pandavas. She goes through all the turmoils in life, experiencing and learning from life; she adapts herself to her surroundings be it in the forests or in the palace as a servant or as a Queen and daughter-in-law to Kunti. However, somewhere along the way in the male-centric stories, this quest of Saturn to discipline Draupadi, the heroic deeds and actions of Draupadi, her woes and wrangling with life is not given much importance to as compared to the heroic deeds of Arjuna or Bhima or Krishna.

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