

GRACE : THE STREAM OF DIVINE LIFE FOR MAN IN THE BHAKTI TRADITIONS

The idea of assistance from God in some tangible way for the betterment of human life is central to the Bhakti traditions in India. *Prasāda* meaning “grace”, “benediction”, “benevolence”, “graciousness”, “tenderness”, “kindness”, “righteousness”, “blessing” etc. of God, visualised in a personal form, occurs as a very common expression in the Bhakti traditions of India, and so documented in some of the Upanishads, Bhagavadgita and Rāmāyāna in the Sanskrit lineage on the one hand, and in the Śaiva siddhanta and the Vaishnavite Agamas of the Tamil lineage on the other. These are two major channels of Bhakti traditions in the Aryan and Dravidian cultural milieux respectively. Also there are other expressions like *dayā*, meaning “mercy”, “gift”, “benevolence” derived from the root *dā*, and *krupā* from *kṛp*, meaning “benediction”, “good pleasure”, “blessing” “grace” as well as *karuṇā* meaning “forgiveness”, “compassion”, “sympathy”, “righteousness” etc. *Anugraha* – “benediction”, “good pleasure”, “guidance”, “assistance”, “protection” – is also found frequently used in the Sanskrit tradition to represent the stream of the divine life offered to mankind for support, sustenance, sanctification and final liberation. In the Tamil tradition *arul* means all these and in Malayalam linguistic lineage of the Dravidian recension *varaprasādam* or *prasādavaram* in the mutually convertible composite form is often used to mean practically all the above said meanings. The gratuitous character (gift dimension) of Grace is especially connoted by the word *varaprasādam* or *prasādavaram* used the Christian Bhakti traditions of the Dravidian lineage of Indian Culture, mostly prevalent in Kerala. Man is constantly supported by the grace (*prasāda*) of a benevolent God who behaves like a benevolent Master, *Guru*, who leads his disciples to the achievement of the ultimate goal of human life, namely, spiritual liberation which is a communion with Himself, livable in this phase of life and to be continued in its perfection to the life beyond. This is said to be life divine, the life lead by the grace of God.

Human Craving for Divine Grace : The Vedic Symbols

From the known recorded history of our composite culture that is Indian, reliable gleanings could be done from the Vedic sources. Though

we often qualify the religious culture of our forefathers of the Vedic times as naturalistic, polytheistic and seldom as monotheistic, the insights of those people of ancient times as recorded in the Vedic *Samhitas* are by no means inferior to some of the most subtle thinking of our present day luminaries regarding matters related to the life of man assisted by the spiritual forces that derive from the sources of the Divinity. As we do today in the midst of our most painful and critical times of drought or flood praying for divine assistance—perhaps we spontaneously awaken our dormant “collective unconscious” of the archetypes prayer and supplication transmitted from our ancestors—men of the Vedic times too seem to have craved for the benevolence and gracious providence of the Spiritual Force or Forces of the Universe. Such cravings appeared in the form of prayers, entreaties, submissions, supplications, confessions and litanies. They imply requests from good times, sulptuous food, bumper crop, rains for parched land. When they felt that supplications are heard they turned their joy into hymns of praise and thanksgiving, glorification of the goodness and greatness of their Deity. But if they felt that their entreaties were not easily responded by the Deity, they used to turn their mood of prayer to repentence over their sins, promising to do penance for their evils, expiate their guilty conscience both individually and collectively. In case nothing happens even after such reparatory acts of prayer and supplication, expiation and penance, they dispose themselves to take the lot as the *vidhi*—judgement of the Divine over their course of life. This attitude or disposition was characterized as fatalistic tendencies of the ancient people. It may be better to qualify this disposition more positively as “resignation to the will of God”. In any case the felt need of the ancient people of our country was to pray for divine assistance alone when all human resources failed.

The origin and development of the domestic rituals centred around the auspicious moments, days, weeks and months constituting the annual cycle of the life of people corresponding to the change of seasons (*rtus*) describes the story of our people's craving for divine grace. The harvest festivals celebrated both on family level and social levels best symbolized the expression of man's joy over God's abundant gifts of natural prosperity. This joy was turned to thanks giving ceremonies which later became the rituals of the orderly celebrations of the memmmorials of the natural gifts of God. For the people of old as even of today the grace of God appeared to be mostly in physical symbols of family welfare, expected progeny, good health, long life, peaceful times and material

appealed for the grace of forgiveness, mercy and reconciliation so that nothing of God's avenging anger may befall on them. So grace in the prayers addressed to Varuna means "forgiveness" for man's sins and "mercy and compassion" over the weakness of human nature which is prone to evil in thought, speech and deed. Hence the following and (many) other similar prayers as recorded in the Vedic Scriptures :

- (1) Whatever law (order) of thine, O God Varuna, as we are men, day after day we violate. . . ,
- (2) Give us not as a prey to death, to be destroyed by thee in wrath, to thy fierce anger when displeased.
- (3) To gain thy mercy, Varuna, with hymns we bind thy heart, as binds the charioteer his tethered horse.
- (4) Yearning for the wide-seeing One, my thoughts move onward unto him, as kine unto their pastures move.
- (5) Varuna, hear this call of mine: be gracious unto us this day; longing for help I cried to thee.
- (6) Release us from the upper bond, untie the bond between, and loose the bonds below, that I may live (Rv. I, 25. 1-3, 16, 19, 21).

The strong belief of the Vedic people was that Varuna always forgave the sins of those repented over their faults and craved for mercy. Mercy comes always as a stream of life-giving grace which strengthens the weak minds while fortifying it for doing meritorious actions

We may also note here that the Vedic Aryans though personified the powers of Nature apparently to give form to the invisible Deity their fundamental faith seems to be very radically monotheistic. This is so clearly stated in one of the hymns of Rigveda as follows: *Ekam sai vipra bahudhā vadanti*- "What is but One the wise call by manifold names"... "They call It Agni, Yama, Matarisvan, Indra, Mitra, Varuna etc. . ." (Rv. I, 164, 46). This gives us the right clue toward the understanding of the Vedic beginnings of the theology of grace as every gifts coming from God through the channels of Nature's blessings.

The Grace of Immortality : The Upanishadic Quest

From the praying man of the Vedic Samhitas for imploring graces for a happy earthly life, we now pass on to the man who is a seeker of

“Immortality”, the greatest gift of God. The Upanishads in general present a variety of theological trends. While some of the major Upanishads like *Isa*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Mundaka*, *Mandukya*, *Taittiriya*, *Aitareya* and *Brahadařanya*, according to Sankaracharya, tend towards a monistic interpretation of the Vedic religion, the other Upanishads (as well as the above-mentioned) according to Rāmānuja and others present a strong possibility of being interpreted in the personalistic theological line. Theology of grace is the other side of the theology of God. Hence the understanding of the concept of God is crucial to the understanding of the means of salvation or liberation as the case may be. Grace is understood to be a personal help of God offered to human beings in view of the ultimate liberation of man from this bonded situation of sinfulness out of which man by his own ability cannot cross over to the shore beyond, the shore of eternity. Hence a personalistic and monotheistic theology is the backdrop of a meaningful theology of grace, where grace is understood as a means for man’s ultimate spiritual enlightenment or liberation which in substance consists in arriving at the intimate communion-experience with God, man’s existential ground and his intentionality pole.

It is in this perspective that the famous “prayer for immortality” of Brahadaranyaka Upanishad has been interpreted by theologians like Ramanuja, Madhva, Vallabha, Radhakrishna and others as a prayer addressed to the Supreme Personal God, Prajapati, the Progenitor of all Creation, also known as Visvakarman, for obtaining from Him the “grace of eternal liberation.” The level of interpersonal relationship between the Creator God and the creature man is presupposed in the style of the Prayer itself :

asato ma sat gamaya—from the unreal lead me to the real;
tamaso ma jyotir gamaya – from darkness lead me to light;
mṛtyor ma amṛtam gamaya – from death lead me to immortality (Br. Up. I, 3, 28).

In the subsequent text of the same Upanishad there is a commentary by the Rshi of the Upanishad itself explaining that all the three lines of the prayer mean the same thing ultimately, “Immortality”. The lasting real, luminous end of man is immortality. But this is a gift of God, for obtaining this state of being man has to pray. It is in this understanding that the theistic schools of Upanishadic interpretation consider this prayer as a prayer for the grace of eternal life or immortality. The ultimate quest of

the man of the Upanishads seems to be the quest for eternal happiness that is primarily a spiritual experience and not merely material comfort of a temporary phase.

The "grace of immortality" implies the grace of enlightenment, correct reality-perception and judgement, the gift of discernment between the eternal and the temporal (*nityānitya vastu viveka*). This is the greatest-wisdom to be obtained from the source of all Wisdom, and that is a gift of God, so says Mundaka Upanishad :

This Self (*Ātman*) cannot be obtained by instruction, nor by sacrifice, nor by intellect, nor by much learning; He is to be obtained by him alone whom He chooses; to him this *Self reveals His own real form* (3, 2, 3).

In the *Kaṭha* and the *Śvetāśvatara* Upanishads the notion of divine grace as *prasāda* is positively stated and the latter contains the doctrine of *bhakti* (devotional commitment to God) very explicitly :

More subtle than the subtle, greater than the great, the Self is hidden in the heart of creatures; the man without desire, all sorrow spent, beholds it, the majesty of the Self, by the grace (*prasādāt*) of the Creator (Kath. Up. 2, 20).

It is obvious from the above citations that it is ordinarily difficult to know the Ultimate Reality of God. But to those who are sincere and open in their attitude to God, He chooses to reveal himself as a gift of his benevolence to his devotee. An unselfish and tranquil person can have a *darśan* (vision) of His Majesty through the grace He himself bestows upon such person. Hence grace is here understood as a *gift of initiation* to the knowledge of God. The *Svetāśvatara* Upanishad 3, 20 states the same idea in more vivid form. Similarly the *Mahānārāyaṇīya* Upanishad 8, 3 has the following insight about the "inceptional grace" that is needed even to know God.

paśyati.. dhātuh prasādāt mahimānam īsam

Through the grace of the Ordainer (Creator) one sees the Lord and his greatness

Here the term *prasāda* means the divine assistance given to the aspirant who intensely seeks after God in view of having a glimpse of the greatness that belongs to God alone. For similar reasons and contexts the Mundaka

Upanishad (3, 1, 8) uses compound expressions like *nāna prasāda* – the “grace of knowledge.”

The Grace of Bhakti in Bhagavadgita

In Bhagavadgita grace appears to be in the form of *bhakti*, the divine impulse initiated by the Lord himself in the inner spirit of man. If man is disposed and prepared to serve God and humanity, God is ready to bestow upon such persons the boon of “tranquility of mind” (Bh. G. II, 64–65; XVIII, 37), kindness and compassion (Bh. G. XVIII, 56, 62, 73), and many other fine human as well as Divine virtues. Above all the gift or true *bhakti* is not only a *sādhanā* for liberation but even the *siddhi* (the gift) of liberation itself because by means of the grace (*prasāda*) of the Lord man realizes the fullness of his life in the fullness of the Divine Life. The basic condition that is expected on the part of man is to have complete trust in the power of God and do one’s dutiful actions with conviction and commitment to God, and even offer to God all results or fruits of one’s actions. This is the perfect form of *bhakti* and the liberation, the ultimate goal of human life is offered by God as his choicest blessings or grace :

Doing continually all actions whatsoever, taking refuge in Me, by My grace (*matprasādāt*) he reaches the eternal and undecaying abode (Gita XVIII, 56).

Fixing your mind on Me, you will by My grace (*matprasādāt*) will overcome all obstacles; yet out of egoism you will not hear Me, and in that case you will perish (XVIII, 58).

Seek refuge in Him alone with all your being (*sarvabhāvena*), O Bharata. By his grace (*tat prasādāt*) you will gain supreme peace (*param śāntim*) and the eternal abode (*stānam śāśvatam*) (XVIII, 62).

Though Acharyas like Śankara could read through the above verses seeds of monistic mysticism, the original synthesiser of the Gita does not seem to exclude the stream of grace that can be channelled through the dry land of pure-being-experience. The human exigency for phantasy need not be an obstacle to share the life-divine, rather it could serve the function of a conveyer belt which is bound between the existential poles of both man and God. *Bhakti* is such an existential conveyer tied between the inter-personal poles of God and man, the initiator being God himself while the elicitor is man. The dynamic force is said to be *prasāda*, “good pleasure”,

of the Lord over man, his collaborator and co-operator in the process of bringing about the welfare or harmony of human life in the universe, (*lokasamgraha*), the great ideal of *Bhagavadgita*.

The great obstacles which block the flow of grace to man from God is man's ignorance about the ultimate concern of life, the inability of some people to distinguish between the real and the unreal, attachment to one's own personal performance and its accompanying vain glory and pride which may lead one to sin. So what the Lord in the Gita episode assures the devotee is the offer of the grace of "enlightenment of mind" which may be an aid to see the truism and realism of life in the light of the ultimate concerns of human existence.

Commenting over this message of grace which leads one to ultimate liberation, as an interpersonal communion between man and God, Prof R.C. Zaehner writes :

In the Gita there are two stages in the process of liberation : first, there is the realization of the self as eternal, and secondly, there is the discovery of God as identical in eternal essence but as distinct in power and personality. In the first two accounts of liberation (in chapters II and V) God plays no significant part at all. Only in chapter VI does He assert his supremacy and priority, and from that point on it is not so much liberation (now taken for granted) that is emphasized; it is rather the relationship of *selfless love* (*bhakti*) that develops (in eternity) between God, the whole, and the self, the part. The revelation of the totality of God is very gradual, but for anyone who will but take the trouble to read the Gita from beginning to end—that is, in the order in which it was presumably written—the emergence of a living God out of an impersonal Brahman in and out of the experience of liberation cannot fail to stand out.¹

Further, Liberation itself depends on God; and God can, if He is so minded shatter it.

Even man's inmost self, a particle of God, though it may be, and therefore timeless and immortal, can be shaken out of its very beatitude if such is God's pleasure. So in the tremendous theophany of chapter XI when Arjuna asks if he may be vouchsafed the sight of Krishna's universal form (*viśvarūpa darśanam*), the vision

1. R.C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavadgita* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 31-32.

shakes his whole being to its foundation. 'I see You', he cries out in terror, 'and my inmost self is shaken: I cannot bear it, I find no peace, O Vishnu' (II, 24). This is the very far cry from the 'fixed, still state of Brahman.'²

Finally, regarding divine grace and its working on man's liberation as taught in the Gita, the following observation of Zaehner seems appropriate in this context. The central message of the Gita seems to be that even the immortal state of Brahman, which is *nirguna*, is still imperfect unless it is filled with the love of God. And so the Gita ends with a clear restatement of this main theme :

Let a man give up all thought of 'I', force, pride, desire and anger and possessiveness; let him not think of anything as 'mine'; at peace (if he does this) to becoming Brahman is he conformed. Brahman become, with self serene, he grieves not, nor desires; the same to all contingent beings he gains the highest love and loyalty to Me. By love and loyalty he comes to know Me as I really am, how great I am and who; and once he knows Me as I am, he enters (Me) forthwith (XVIII, 53-55)... And now again give ear to this my highest Word, of all the most mysterious: 'I love you well'. Therefore will I tell you your salvation. Bear me in mind, love Me and worship Me, sacrifice, prostrate yourself to Me: so will you come to Me, I promise you truly, for you are dear to me. This is the message of the Gita—the union of man with God. What follows is necessarily an anti-climax.³

The Theology of Grace in the Dravidian Sources

Our discussion on the doctrine and theology of Divine Grace in the religious traditions of India will remain incomplete, if we do not give a proportionate place to the vast literature, both scriptural and spiritual in the Dravidian lineage of Indian religious classics. For the time being we may select a few of the important sources of theological and spiritual traditions.

a) In Tirukural

We do not pray for gold, wealth, luxury but for three things:
love, divine grace and good deeds.

2. Ibid, p.35.

3. Ibid, p. 36.

We wish to be delivered from the sufferings of rebirth and our only desire is to live at your feet.⁴

“Cling to the Lord’s feet” is almost a *mantra* in Tirukural and this resonates the vibrations of true *bhakti* with the deep sentiments of love and loyalty to God.

b) The Saivite Agamas

There is strong emphasis on the need of the knowledge of Śiva as the true way to liberation. But the theology is personalistic and very theistic. Hence the descent of divine grace from Siva is a *sine-qua-non* requirement for spiritual realization and final liberation. The *Agamas* propose four steps to liberation: ethical perfection (*carya*), true worship with proper rituals (*kriyā*), sustained devotion to Siva (*yoga*), and true knowledge (*jnāna*), the last of which is the sole means of final liberation (*śivajnanam*). This helps the devotee to grasp the power of Siva (*Śiva-śakti*) which is salutary. In the *Tirumantiram* a classical devotional work of the *Saivasiddhānta*, we come across a high level of *bhakti* mysticism. *Bhakti* is described as “melting in love for God”. This itself is a grace initiated by Siva himself. As Siva pours out his love into the heart of the devotee, so the devotee reciprocates in his own measure of love, towards Siva. He lets himself pass and flow into what he loves, and gently glides as a fluid into God, the other pole of his love. The nature of the devotee’s love lies in concentration and meditation on God, praise of him and desire of his grace.⁵

c) In Manickavacakar’s Tiruvacakam

Tiruvacakam of Manickavacakar of the ninth century A.D. is a marvellous devotional lyric and a fine theological and spiritual classic of the Tamil tradition. It is said that he who is not melted by *Tiruvacakam* must have a stone for a heart. In the theology of Manickavacakar there are two articles so Saivite Creed: The sovereignty of God who dwells in all creatures, and His love that is sanctifying and leading one to liberation. Accordingly God in the personified form of Siva is the Lord of creation and the ruler of the universe as well as indweller of all beings especially of humans. The indwelling presence of God in human heart is the other word for the sustaining grace of God given to man from the moment of his birth by Siva himself. The doctrine of divine immanence

4. Cf. M. Dhavamony, *Love of God According to Saiva Siddhanta* (Oxford, 1971), p. 352.

5. Cf. Dhavamony, *Op. cit.*, p. 353.

in the world and in human souls is Manickavacakar's basic postulates for his theology of grace. His own experience is articulated as follows :

He (*Siva*) is the Lord who has taken possession of me; the mother of the universe who penetrates the seven worlds; the Lord who rules over them all (*Tiruvacakam* 8,7).

He is said to be the essence all that live in the sense that every living being is the embodiment of God's goodness and finds its ultimate destiny in him. He reigns over all souls and is intimately present to them. He entered my flesh, united with my self, never leaves my soul (12,1; 207).

According to Manickavacakar not only God's loving presence and activity the very condition of the continued existence of the world and men, but his direct action upon the minds and hearts of his devotees leads them to final liberation, "Lest I should go astray, he laid his hand on me. He is inseparable even for a moment from the hearts of the devotees though far distant from those devoid of love, he is the inner delight of those who worship him" (1,1,10).

The One, the most precious, the infinite came down to earth
I did not despise his descent as *Guru who appeared in Grace*.
Siva the mighty Lord, as honey and as sweet ambrosia, himself
came, entered my soul and gave his grace to me, his slave (4,75-
77;38,10).

Manickavacakar presents God's love in terms of mercy and grace. God is the ocean of mercy (*karunai kaṭal*, 10,9). He gives the heavenly food of mercy and grace to sustain devotees in their spiritual life (3,179-81). His nature itself is said to consist of merciful love, more precious than a mother's (1,61). God is the sacred mount of grace and goodness, altogether free from evil. He is the flood of mighty changeless mercy has no limits (5,91).

Let me conclude this discussion on Grace as the stream of divine life to man with the following lines of Manickavacakar:

What you (God) have given me is you, and what you have gained is me (22,10).

Entering within my breast he made me his (13,17).

O Lord, I have seized you... hold you fast; henceforth whither grace imparting would you rise? (37,1).