

Words for Grace in Hinduism
Winfried Corduan

Professor of Philosophy and Religion Taylor University Upland, IN 46989	wncorduan@tayloru.edu http://www.wincorduan.com
---	---

It is generally accepted that at least some forms of Hinduism claim a doctrine of grace. It is also clear that this claim, when compared to the Christian understanding of grace, will reduce the number of Hindu schools that even come close to a genuine concept of grace to a very few. This phenomenon was studied in detail by Rudolf Otto in his book *India's Religion of Grace and Christianity Compared and Contrasted*, published in 1930.¹ Otto described the southern school of Vaishnava (Tenkalai, founded by Pillai Locharya) and clarified its similarities to Christianity as well as the intrinsic differences. Otto's conclusion was that, all similarities notwithstanding, ultimately the differences outweigh the similarities so that we cannot think of a true convergence of beliefs. Furthermore, despite some tendentious arguments to the contrary, Otto concluded that there was little probability of any influence of Christianity on Hinduism that could have produced this apparent similarity.

In *Grace in Christianity and Hinduism: A Comparative Study*, Sabapathy Kulandran² undertook a more comprehensive study by including a lengthier discussion of Christian theology as well as examining more schools of Hinduism than Otto did. A particularly striking addition is the amount of attention that Kulandran pays to the southern school of Saiva Siddhanta, where the grace of Shiva is a dominant theme. However, he also winds up with roughly the same conclusion as Otto did, namely by recognizing that when all is said and done, grace as understood in Christianity, and grace as understood in Hinduism, are very different concepts.

In this paper I wish to focus on one aspect of these studies that deserves further analysis. Let us take it as a given for the moment that both of these works are correct and thus:

1. certain schools of Hinduism have concepts that resemble the Christian notion of grace in many important ways, so that

2. the English term "grace" is appropriate in those instances, but that
3. there are also significant differences so that,
4. even if where the word "grace" is appropriate, there are fundamental conceptual differences in what the word encompasses in both religions.

My question arises in connection with the second point. Insofar as it might be appropriate to use the English term "grace" from time to time, is there a Sanskrit term corresponding to the English word? After all, we are looking at an English translation of a Sanskrit term, and it would seem to be a legitimate question which Sanskrit term it is that expresses the same concept in that language. The idea would be that there is a particular word in Christian theology that has a specific meaning and that this word has a corresponding term in Hinduism, which carries roughly the same meaning. In Christian theology the word in the New Testament is *charis*, which then can be translated as "grace" in English or "*Gnade*" in German or words with corresponding meanings in other languages. What word in Sanskrit performs this function within Hinduism? The answer will be complex.³

No language is ever static; just think of the many ways in which we use the term "grace" in English:

1. Father always said grace before dinner.
2. She danced the waltz with a lot of grace.
3. You could show a little more grace under pressure.
4. By grace are ye saved through faith.

Thus, the word "grace" in English shows a lot of usages, but is often heavily restricted by each context. For example when father prays before eating, this "grace" has nothing to do with the "grace" with which a woman may dance. Or, when someone is exhorted to show a little more "grace" under pressure, chances are very slim that he is supposed to say a lengthier prayer before meals.

Similarly, when it comes to the last of these four usages, the word has a specific theological meaning that no one could (or should) confuse with the other three mentioned. More specifically, in the theological realm, even allowing for variations, such as those between Catholic or Protestant interpretations, the meaning of "grace" will not deviate significantly from the idea of "unmerited favor bestowed by God" and remain distinct from

favor, mercy, or kindness. If someone were to advocate a definition of "grace" that includes earning your salvation, this would not just be an innovative use of the term, it would be theologically wrong.

Now, here is the twist as we look at the situation for Hinduism: In Sanskrit there is no such single distinct term. There are a number of words that are frequently translated as "grace" into English, but they all have multiple meanings, even in a theological setting, and it is purely up to the translator to make the decision of whether to use "grace" or "kindness" or "mercy." For example, a commonly used word is *prasaada*,⁴ which can mean any one word along a large spectrum of expressions of a positive disposition to someone or something. If one wants to express "grace," *prasaada* is a likely choice, but the subsequent reader must determine whether "grace" is the intended meaning—rather than "kindness" or "indulgence"—from the context, not the word itself.

In his study, Kulandran makes a somewhat surprising decision. As a scholar examining another religion, he correctly allows the other religion to speak for itself. In his initial selection of data he acknowledges the verbal ambiguity, but decides to ignore it, at least for the moment. "Whatever be the etymology of these words they have come to denote the idea corresponding to grace in the West."⁵ But this is a serious overstatement, leaving the reader to think that nowadays all those words mean "grace." It is not just the etymology that carries many shades of meaning. Words such as *prasaada* have multiple meanings synchronically as well as diachronically, and they are used by Hindu writers who would not want to be associated with a concept corresponding to grace. Thus, Kulandran goes so far in attempting to be fair to his Hindu sources that he actually winds up being unfair to some of them. Some writers might use *prasaada* to describe a god's positive and merciful attitude, but would be offended by attributing a doctrine of grace to them. Thus, conceptually the more important issue is whether an author means a doctrine of grace when he uses *prasaada*; the word itself is not indicative either way. The same thing applies to the other terms that are sometimes translated as "grace."

These are the terms to which Kulandran refers:

a) *prasaada* (प्रसाद्ः) --clarity, favor, offering;

- b) *dayaa* (दयाः) -- grant, gift, pity, tenderness, compassion, mercy, sympathy;
- c) *kripaa* (क्रिपाः । कृपाः) --doing, long for;
- d) *karunaa* (करुणाः) --pity, compassion, tenderness;
- e) *anugraha* (अनुग्रहः) -favor, kindness, obligation;
- f) *Arul* --a Tamil word, almost always translated as "grace," for which we can do a contextual analysis.

Neither space nor time allow us to look at all of them, but it will be instructive to sink a few linguistic probes to uncover the meaning and use of these words a little more. My aim is the fairly negative one of showing that for each of these terms there are meanings that make their application to a genuine doctrine of grace awkward.

1. *Prasaada* (प्रसादः)

Prasaada is the word that is frequently translated as "grace" in the Bhagavad Gita. It should not be confused with *prasaadh* (प्रसाध्), which means to accomplish or succeed. In the Gita, the word is used four times in the last chapter:

Reference	Transliteration	Devanagari	Translation ⁶
18:58	<i>matprasaadaat tarishyasi</i>	मत्प्रसादात् तरिश्यसि	"From my grace thou shalt pass over"
18:62	<i>tatprasaadaat paraam shaantiim</i>	तत्प्रसादात् परां शान्तिं	"From that grace, supreme peace."

18:73	<i>tvatprasaadaan</i>	त्वत्प्रसादान्	"From your grace"
18:75	<i>vyaasaprasaadaac</i>	व्यासप्रसादाच्	"By the grace of Vyaasa." (referring to the alleged compiler of the Mahabharata)

It seems pretty clear then, that in the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna gives his grace to his followers. However, two points intervene in this all-too-easy interpretation. First of all, in the Gita itself *prasaada* can take on other meanings than grace.

2:64	prasaadam adhigacchati	प्रसादम् अधिगच्छति	"He attains tranquility."
------	---------------------------	-----------------------	---------------------------

Second, if we look a little further at the context of each of the above uses of *prasaada*, we find that Krishna's "grace" is nothing more than providing those who would be his followers the opportunity to work for their salvation. Who is it, who receives this *prasaadam* ? Let us look at the verses referring to Krishna's grace again, using Sergeant's more readable translation.

18:57-58

Mentally renouncing all actions in Me,
Devoted to Me as the Supreme,
Taking refuge in the yoga of discrimination,
Constantly think of Me.
Fixing your mind on Me,
You shall pass over all difficulties, through My grace;
but if, through egoism, you will not listen,
then you shall perish.

18:62

Fly unto Him alone for refuge

With your whole being, Arjuna.
From His grace, you shall attain supreme peace
And the eternal abode.

18:73:

Arjuna spoke: My delusion is destroyed
And I have gained wisdom through your grace, Krishna.
My doubts are gone.
I shall do as You command.

In short, as long as someone practices the yoga that Krishna commands and focuses his entire being on Krishna all day every day, he becomes eligible for Krishna's grace. Or, perhaps it should go the other way around: Krishna's grace makes it possible for someone to focus his entire being on Krishna all day every day and to practice the Yoga that Krishna commands, so that he will receive redemption. Either way, this is not grace as commonly understood by the English term.

Let me make sure you understand what I am saying. I am not accusing the author of the Bhagavad Gita of duplicity by using the word "grace" for what is obviously a totally works-and-devotion oriented redemption. What I am saying is that anyone who thinks that the Bhagavad Gita contains a doctrine of grace because it makes use of the word *prasaada* is making a serious mistake. In this case, at least, *prasaada* does not mean what we might consider grace from within our Christian context.

2. *Anugraha* (अनुग्रहः)

Let there be no question about the fact that *anugraha* can and sometimes does mean "grace" in a strict sense. It is the Hindi derivative of this word that is used in contemporary Hindi translations of, say, Ephesians 2:8. Nevertheless, it is as likely to mean "love" or "mercy" as "grace." This word does not come up in the Bhagavad Gita, but it appears multiple times in the much larger Srimad Bhagavatam and in the Sri Caitanya Caritamrita, both of which have been instrumental in the Krishna movements of the last 500 years.

Take, for example, this little episode out of the Srimad Bhagavatam. After a pregnancy that lasted a hundred years, a woman named Diti gave birth to

two gigantic and powerful demons, named Hiranyaaksha and Hiranyakashipu. After causing much trouble, they challenged the god Varuna to battle. Varuna refused, pleading the weakness of old age, but counselled the twins to confront Vishnu. He explained to the demons:

It is in order to exterminate wicked fellows like you and to show His grace to the virtuous that He assumes His various incarnations like Varaaha [the boar avatar]."⁷

The word "grace" in this passage is *anugraha*.

Note, then, that *anugraha* is something that Vishnu gives to those who are virtuous and deserving, and that those who are evil will not receive grace. Thus, *anugraha* is mercy or favor, but not really grace.



Another variant on *anugraha* is found in the South Indian school of Saiva Siddhanta. An online dictionary defines the term thus:

"*anugraha*: revealing grace - which grants knowledge and severs the soul's bonds - represented by Siva's raised left foot, and by His lower left hand, held in *gajahasta* ("elephant trunk") mudra, inviting approach."⁸

Thus *anugraha* has an intellectual dimension. It reveals a path to travel in order to find redemption. That in this context *anugraha* is not redemption *per se* becomes even clearer when we look at *arul* as our next term.

3. *Arul*

Even though *arul* is often combined with Sanskrit terms in its home literature, it is a Tamil word, used to express the grace of Shiva in Saiva Siddhanta, a Tamil Hindu movement. Shiva is seen as a god, whose entire motivation is to bestow *arul* on human beings.

As an example, here is a line of poetry, written in praise of a Tamil saint:

But, Oh Lord of beautiful Vathavur! You attained successively a form of Love, a form of Grace and finally a form of Bliss.⁹

The word "Grace" here, needless to say, is *arul*. This excerpt may already indicate that *arul* is ultimately something that one earns, like a diploma, but it becomes even more obvious as we move on.

From another on-line source, here is a definition of *arul*:

Arul, Grace. The soul has won over Irul [darkness] and Marul [confusion], gave up darkness and confusion, seeks knowledge of Pati, the Chief, the God, or Siva and receives knowledge and Grace.¹⁰

Consequently, if one thing is clear, it is that *arul* is not a free gift.

A teacher asks a rhetorical question and answers it:

How does arul, grace, set in? During the time of *pashu-jnana* [human life], the soul comes to find that if he performs good and virtuous deeds, life always seems to take a positive turn. Whereas in negative, unvirtuous acts he slowly becomes lost in a foreboding abyss of confusion. Thus, in faith, he turns toward the good and holy. . . . This will allow, at the right moment in his life, *arul* to set in. This is known as the descent of grace, *shaktinipata*.¹¹

Well, one can call it what one wishes, but this "grace" is a only boon conferred on a devoted seeker. And, to return to the previous section, we have now further confirmation that when *anugraha* appears in this context of Saiva Siddhanta, it is also only something to earn, not something to receive.

4. *Kripaa* (क्रिपाः । कृपाः)

Let us look at one other word. *Kripaa* is the word that is used frequently in the one context where a true concept of grace does appear, in the southern school of Vaishnava, called Tenkalai. We can trace the lineage of this school roughly this way. One of the most consistently monistic, impersonalistic schools of Hinduism was that of Shankara, who lived perhaps around the

eighth century A.D. His teachings were subsequently opposed by Ramaanuja, who insisted that the supreme form of God is personal. Interestingly, Shankara came from a Shaivite background, although his teaching transcended the personal identity of any god, whereas Ramaanuja was a Vaishnavite. Subsequent to Ramaanuja, his Vaishnavite legacy divided itself into a number of options. The two main branches were the northern school led by Vedaanta Desika (Vadakalai, also sometimes called monkey school) and the southern school of Pillai Lokacharya (Tenkalai, the cat school).¹²

Now, if there is any one place in Hinduism where there is a true doctrine of grace, it is in Tenkalai. Pillai Lokacharya taught that salvation is not only freely bestowed by God; our own efforts of making ourselves worthy of it, such as in bhakti (devotion) are only going to backfire. All one can do is to receive it and accept it. By the grace of God we are *sarva papebhyo* (free from all sin), and this is *kripaa*.¹³

We must understand, however, that the concepts involved are radically different from any Christian notions. The effects of sin (*paapa, enas*) are to hold people back from escaping the cycle of *samsara* by causing *karma*. There is no question here of human beings becoming reconciled to a holy God. In fact, God is not only not offended by our sins; he rather thrives on them. "The sins of a jeevatma is a source of joy for the Lord who relishes the same like a cow licking off the dirt on the body of its calf."¹⁴

But again, it is not the word *kripaa* itself that makes the difference. The followers of Vedaanta Desika (the Vadakalai school), use the word as well. They believe, however, that one has to qualify for it. "When a jeeva surrenders, the Lord forgives the sins committed by the jeevatma and grants Moksha."¹⁵

Conclusion

What can we make of the fact that Sanskrit does not have an unequivocal word for "grace" available to Hinduism. Of course, this statement is backwards. It is because Hinduism does not have a heritage of grace, that no unambiguous word has developed. Even where we might see a manifestation of a doctrine that qualifies in its own way as grace (though not very much like the Christian view), the words that are used to express this

belief have to do double-duty. The only way one could make it crystal clear, would be by indexing the word to a particular school, e.g. *kripaa-as-used-by-Tenkalai*, or *prasaada-as-understood-by-Lokacharya*.

Let us recall one more time that this observation should not be construed as a criticism of Hinduism *per se*. Hinduism is not obligated to follow specific verbal conventions for our convenience. The important lesson for us to learn is to recognize that when we read English translations of Hindu scriptures and the word "grace" appears, chances are very, very low that the word used is anything like what Christians mean by grace. The overwhelming probabilities are that it either means nothing more than "mercy," or that it is tied to an understanding of salvation that makes grace meaningless because sin is not a serious problem.

Notes

¹ Trans. by Frank Hugh Foster (New York: Macmillan, 1930).

² Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2004. Reprint of 1964.

³ An interesting additional question, though it cannot help us with an examination of Sanskrit Hindu texts, is what word is used in the Hindi Bible, for example in Ephesians 2:8. The Hindi word is *anugraha*. क्योंकि विश्वास के द्वारा अनुग्रह ही से तुम्हारा उद्धार हुआ है, और यह तुम्हारी ओर से नहीं, बरन परमेश्वर का दान है।

⁴ In listing vocabulary words for Sanskrit, there is always the question of which form to use. The easiest solution, which I am utilizing for the transliterations, is to use the stem form, which would be *prasaada* (प्रसाद), but which is not an actual form of the word (except sometimes in the vocative case). The nominative ends in an "s," *prasaadas* (प्रसादस्), but, given the euphonic rules of Sanskrit, it hardly ever appears that way. Normally in a dictionary it will be listed with the "visarga," a final aspiration, indicated by two dots like a colon, and thus we get *prasaadah* (प्रसादः), and this is the form that I am using for the Sanskrit. This convention might seem a little complex, but in actuality it is still far more straightforward than the linguistic reality in question.

Consider the following contrast. In Latin, another Indo-European language with declensions, the naming form of a noun is the nominative. "Grace" is "*gratia*," and it will appear in a sentence in precisely that form. In an actual context for Sanskrit, the "as" or "ah" will frequently change to an "o" (thus प्रसादो as in नप्रसादो विद्यते कर्म ॥ *na prasaado vidyate karman* -- grace is never a work). Again, in Latin, if you combine two nouns, even with a postpositive, and with the second word starting with the same letter as the last letter of the previous word, the forms still stay the same: *gratia animaque* -- "grace and the soul." But in Sanskrit, if the word whose stem is

an "a" is followed by another word that starts with an "a," the "a" in the second word is replaced by an apostrophe (Ś), while the first "as" or "ah" will be an "o," as previously mentioned. Similar transformations occur with many other combinations. Thus, for example, "Grace and mercy," which could theoretically be *prasaadas anugrahas cha* becomes *prasaado'nugrahasha* --
प्रसादोऽनुग्रहश्च.

⁵ Kulandran, *Grace*, p. 28.

⁶ The translations, both literal and more readable are from Winthrop Sargeant, *The Bhagavad Gita* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994).

⁷ Bhaktivedanta Foundation. URL: <http://vedabase.net/sb/3/17/31/en>
[Bhaktivedanta VedaBase: Śrīmad Bhāgavatam](http://vedabase.net/sb/3/17/31/en) 3.17.31

⁸ "Hinduism Dictionary on Anugraha." URL:
<http://www.experiencefestival.com/a/Anugraha/id/61031>

⁹ 'Ramalinga: The Evolution towards a Divine Life in the Earth. Four Tamil Samaya Acharyas." URL: <http://www.ramalinga.com/ingles/masters.htm>

¹⁰ "Primer in Saiva Siddhanta" URL:
http://www.bhagavadgitausa.com.cnchost.com/primer_in_saiva_siddhanta.htm

¹¹ "Dancing with Shiva 3"
http://www.himalayanacademy.com/resources/books/dws/dws_r3_tradition-of-masters.html

¹² The dates of Desika are A.D. 1268-1369; those of Lokacharya are A.D. 1264-1327. Kulandran, *Grace*, p. 177.

¹³ C. Umakantham, "Significance of Charama Sloka" URL:
<http://www.tirumala.org/sapthagiri/112002/sign.htm>

¹⁴ Sri Mani Vardarajan, "Vadakkalai-Thenkkalai Doctrinal Differences"
URL: <http://members.tripod.com/~sriramanujar/tVsv.html>

¹⁵ Ibid.