

## **Water Transfers: Hindu Narrative and Agricultural Ethics**

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Water disputes and environmental degradation loom large as growing problems of the twenty-first century, and environmental ethicists, theologians and writers claim that we need a new story to replace inadequate narratives of how humans should inhabit the earth. Their call, however, does not answer the question of how story translates into changed practice. This presentation demonstrates two points: first, Hindu agricultural narrative provides a means to rethink how we conceptualize moral thought regarding water transfers; and second, cognitive theory, as articulated by Mark Johnson and George Lakoff, illustrates how the metaphoric thought that underlies moral reasoning translates into behavior. Exposing the semantics of how we frame moral problems then renders these frames conscious and therefore changeable.

In this well-known (and considerably abbreviated) story the agricultural deity Balaram forcibly diverts the Yamuna River (a Goddess) to release her waters and to insure the region's agricultural fertility. Devotees understand this act in an agricultural context. This pattern of this story—a male deity acting aggressively to insure the productivity of a female river deity—is reiterated numerous times in the Hindu tradition. Given a need for agricultural productivity, what human actions are appropriate? This question is critical because continued extraction of resources is unsustainable and, typically, unequitable. That is, water is a finite resource.

This story provides an opportunity to examine the metaphoric frameworks that structure human moral attitudes towards the earth. For example, if the earth is a commodity, certain actions are inevitable. The moral universe shaped by tropes of extraction differs from that evoked by tropes of relationship and reciprocity. These metaphors structure how we think through moral dilemmas and further how we act upon them. Exploring the narrative basis for moral choices illustrates alternate moral realms, how altered language and narratives can transform lived practice.

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