

Substance-code, Body-person and Social Relations in India

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This paper takes up the concept of “substance-code” in the ethnographic context of India to illustrate how social relations are constructed. The idea of substance-code was first introduced in anthropology of South Asia and has been subsequently taken up in ethnographies of other parts of the world. Substance-code, or coded substance, is material substance imbued with meaning which is transferred from person to person. According to this logic, a person is made up of substances which are transferable, and there is continuity between substances composing the actor, substances which flow to a receiver as the result of action, and substances composing the receiver of the action. In other words, persons are not conceptualised as bounded units or an individual, but as open-ended entity or a “dividual”. Transfer of coded substances occurs through food, sex, sharing social space and gift exchange. In this paper, I introduce the concept of the “body-person” to describe and analyse how the flow of substance-code constitutes the material body and social position as a single entity. In this view, the body is embedded in social relations throughout the person’s life course from the very beginning at the time of conception to the time of death. I take up examples of how a body is formed at conception and transformed through ritual and social interaction in India. The body-person in this context is conceptualised as a manifested form of *sakti*, an unlimited power that is the generative potential itself. By *sakti* being manifest, I refer to the materialisation of the infinite power in a bounded form in concrete space and time as a specific body-person. The life course of a body-person is a process of transformation of the material form of *sakti*. The ethnographic description in this paper deals with how *sakti* is transformed with special reference to changes in a woman’s body-person during her life course. What is particular about a female body-person is that it has the capacity of mediating the transformation of *sakti* in the life course of a body-person by nurturing the foetus in the womb, giving birth to the body-person and feeding and maintaining it. A married woman whose husband is alive is responsible for cooking for and feeding family members, and exchanging food between households. Partaking of food is a major way in which the body-person is transformed. The woman is the main transformer of raw food to cooked food and the one who serves this food. She is thus the mediator of *sakti* through food to the family members. The family members share substance-codes by eating the same food mediated through the wife-mother. This paper shows the significance of substance-code exchange in the construction of social relations which change over time in the course of a body-person’s life.