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**Citation for published version:**

Cross, J 2019, 'Selling with Prejudice: Social Enterprise and Caste at the Bottom of the Pyramid in India' *Ethnos*, vol. 84, no. 3, pp. 458-479. DOI: 10.1080/00141844.2018.1561487

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1080/00141844.2018.1561487](https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2018.1561487)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Published In:**

*Ethnos*

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

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To cite this article: Jamie Cross (2019) Selling with Prejudice: Social Enterprise and Caste at the Bottom of the Pyramid in India, *Ethnos*, 84:3, 458-479, DOI: [10.1080/00141844.2018.1561487](https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2018.1561487)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2018.1561487>



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Published online: 17 Apr 2019.



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# Selling with Prejudice: Social Enterprise and Caste at the Bottom of the Pyramid in India

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## ABSTRACT

How do you sell a solar powered lamp to India's un-electrified, rural poor? This contribution to Anthropology for Sale explores the work of direct selling in rural India, reflecting on the forms of prejudice, difference and exclusion that are produced as multinational companies create markets for consumer goods in places of chronic global poverty. In the highlands of Orissa, India, a US company sells solar powered lights through a network of young male sales agents. The company and its products express empathy and proximity, attachment and connection to India's indigenous and low caste communities. Yet the company's salesmen are often more concerned with maintaining forms of structural advantage and their sales practices articulate social differences based on caste, class and gender. Rather than see prejudice as a peripheral effect of expansion and growth in emerging markets this paper proposes that we see it as a constitutive feature of markets at the 'bottom of the pyramid'.

**KEYWORDS** Youth; caste; social enterprise; solar energy; bottom of the pyramid

## Just Sell!

'So much tension. Heavy tension.'

Aseem paced around the hotel room in his string vest and shorts. It was half past nine in the morning. He had been awake for three hours, making calls to his salesmen on a mobile phone. He dialled number after number. Occasionally he got an answer. More often he got a 'busy' or 'no signal' tone.

Aseem sat down on the bed and sighed heavily. He had arrived in this small market town, the administrative capital of Koraput district in the highlands of southern Odisha, India, two days previously and it was already time to leave again. His train was leaving at noon. On the mattress beside him was a half-packed travel bag and a briefcase. He was

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travelling with two changes of clothes, a wash kit, a collection of school exercise books (his paperwork) and two boxes of solar lanterns (his samples).

Middle aged, moustachioed and portly, selling solar lanterns had taken a visible toll on Aseem. 'You see how the job is,' he said. 'This is the routine: we travel all night and work all day'. Over the past year, Aseem estimated that he spent twenty days in every thirty on the road, travelling from small town to small town across rural Odisha, leaving his wife and two daughters at home.

Aseem cut his teeth during a decade in telesales, selling insurance products over the phone. In the early 2010s, on the advice of a friend, he jumped into India's renewable energy sector and secured a regional management position for a company that I will call Big Light Earth. Big Light Earth is a US-Indian company that manufactures and sells small, portable solar powered lighting devices across South Asia and Sub Saharan Africa. The company is a for-profit, social enterprise: the design, development and marketing of its solar lighting devices are driven by a commitment to bringing about improvements in education, health and livelihoods for the unelectrified global poor.

In the mid 2010s, India was one of Big Light Earth's flagship global markets and the company prioritised sales in regions with low rates of electrification. The eastern state of Odisha was a strategic focus. An estimated 37 per cent of all households across Odisha were reportedly unelectrified, with the state's Adivasi and Dalit communities disproportionately likely to live off the grid (Tripathi & Jain 2017). Big Light Earth tested its first prototypes in Odisha and recruited teams of rural salesmen to market the company's products direct to rural customers.

Aseem slumped back on his bed. As one of Big Light Earth's regional sales-manager he was responsible for multiple teams of young salesmen across Odisha, including this one in Koraput district.

'From six o'clock this morning, I have been calling each of the team one by one. I ask, 'What is the latest target? How many have you sold?' Everyday, this is my routine. They only sell one or two lanterns a day. But they need to be selling ten or twenty. So, I have to try to motivate them, tell them to go to new places, new markets.'

Aseem looked back at his list of numbers and began to work through them again. He called Titu, one of his star sellers. No answer. He re-dialled. This time, Titu answered his call. Aseem was not impressed.

'Where are you? Are you sleeping or what? Soon I'll leave, and I want to be sure that you boys know what you are doing.'

Over the next five minutes Aseem checked and double checked Titu's sales figures for the previous month. Then he checked and double checked Titu's sales target for the month ahead and his plans to achieve it. He ended the call with a motivational message.

'Sell anywhere! I don't care what you do: just sell. It doesn't matter where. Just Sell! In corporates, the first thing is sales.'

Aseem hung up, sighed, looked at his watch and called the hotel reception to order us both cups of chai. 'Tea is for tension,' he said.

Over several months I met Aseem on his visits to Koraput town. I frequently found him early in the morning, in his vest and shorts, sitting on a bed in a cheap hotel room,

fresh off the overnight train, briefcase and overnight bag open on the bed, his mobile phone clutched to his ear or a retinue of salesmen hovering around.

On one trip he ran a day long training session for twenty sales agents and I joined the team as they gathered in his hotel room.

'The best salesman in Odisha,' Aseem announced to the assembled group of young men in their early twenties, standing straight and serious in casual shirt sleeves and jeans, 'is a guy who goes by the name of Ashish.'

'You should all meet him. He leads a team of calibre and guts. Everyone of them is well qualified. They all know the proper way to talk and the proper way to sell. Those guys all have quality. In fact, those guys are all better at selling than you. Whatever you guys can't do those guys can do. Wherever you guys cannot perform those guys can perform. But if you do what I say, if you follow the company's lead, then you too can go ahead and rise.'

In the intimacy of his hotel room, face to face with their manager, Aseem's sales-team responded to this speech with exaggerated acquiescence. 'Yes Sir,' they murmured in response. 'Yes Sir! You are right!'

'Sir, you are explaining all this for our own future,' said Titu.

'Sir, if we remember this, it will be beneficial for us,' said Bibek.

'Sir! You are speaking the truth,' said Ganesh.

'Yes Sir! We will do as you say and take the company towards growth,' said Pavak.

But behind his back the cohort of young salesmen asked each other the same questions that I asked them: how *do* you sell a solar lantern to India's unelectrified rural poor? What is the 'proper' way to talk? What is the *proper* way to sell?

This contribution to Anthropology for Sale examines how strategies for selling consumer goods in emerging markets renew forms of social prejudice, difference and exclusion. Like other contributors to this Special Issue, I develop an analysis of selling based on materialist, symbolic and linguistic approaches to the study of market action in anthropology (e.g. Gell 1982; Miller 2005; Besnier 2004; Keane 2008), as well as regional ethnographic studies (Brown 2014; Heslop 2016; Heslop this issue).

The transactions between buyers and sellers lie outside the frame of current writing about social entrepreneurship in the context of international development (e.g. Dolan & Rajak 2018). As anthropologists remind us, however, more is exchanged in market transactions than currencies and commodities. As Webb Keane (2008) has written, just because a market transaction does not appear to reproduce long term relationships or the 'highest plane of social values' it is no less embedded in a 'social imaginary' and no less 'fraught with moral evaluation and resources for political manipulation' (p35).

Where other contributions to this special issue (e.g. Siobhvan Magee) address the question of what people choose to sell, this paper is focused on how people sell. Power is always imminent in market exchange and, as I show, the micro-politics of selling solar powered lighting devices in the highlands of southern Odisha renews and reworks relationships of caste, class and gender. Rather than challenge existing social inequalities, social entrepreneurship is creating new arenas in which inequality can be expressed, performed and reproduced. Some might see this as a *peripheral* effect of market expansion and growth. In this paper, I propose that we see it as a

*constitutive* feature of capitalist economy at what has come to be called the ‘bottom of the pyramid’ (Prahalad 2006, Cross & Street 2009, Schwittay 2009, Errington *et al.* 2012, Elyachar 2012).

## The Hard Sell: An Anthropology of Direct Sales

Over the past decade corporate executives, managers and entrepreneurs have successfully framed the world’s poorest communities as untapped markets for consumer goods that also ‘do good’. From solar powered lighting technologies (Cross 2013 2014, 2018), to ‘nutritionally enhanced’ foodstuffs (Street 2015) these ‘little development devices’ (Collier *et al.* 2017) are things that have been imbued with the capacity to transform or sustain life in conditions of chronic poverty, state neglect or failure and crisis. By contrast with the ambition of large-scale development infrastructures and technologies these interventions have a minimalist biopolitics, targeted at specific problems and populations (Redfield 2012).

Around the world, multinational corporations and social entrepreneurs sell these goods direct to consumers rather than through conventional retail channels. Direct selling was first formalised as a model for modern corporations in post-war America and rapidly globalised (Biggart 1989). In 1950s India, for example, sales of singer sewing machines had less to do with advertising than with its direct sellers knocking on people’s doors (Arnold 2011). Over the second half of the twentieth century this model was amplified by ‘multilevel marketing’ strategies that compensated direct salespeople not just for their own sales but also for those of sales agents they recruited. Today, small, medium and large-scale enterprises have made direct selling a key part of their efforts to get brand name healthcare and energy technologies into the hands of low income urban and rural consumers across sub Saharan Africa and South Asia (Cross & Street 2009, Dolan & Johnstone-Lewis 2011; Blowfield & Dolan 2014; Dolan & Rajak 2016).

Today the infrastructures and logistics of direct selling are closely aligned to international programmes of social and economic development. As development organisations in South East Asia, Sub Saharan Africa and Latin America have identified a youth demographic as ‘economically under-productive’ they have also established this group as the legitimate target of interventions aimed at producing proper, market actors (Meagher 2016). One consequence has been a proliferation of programmes funded by international development organisations – from bilateral agencies like the UK’s Department for International Development, to multilateral agencies like the World Bank, and charities like Oxfam, or Practical Action – that seek to transform young men and women into direct sales agents or ‘entrepreneurs’. In their discourses of development, direct selling work is a vehicle for empowerment and livelihood generation, with a net positive development outcome (Dolan 2012; Blowfield & Dolan 2014).

Over the past twenty years social anthropologists have tracked the global circulation of direct selling models: from Thailand (Wilson 1999) to Mexico (Cahn 2006, 2008), Bangladesh (Huang 2017), and Siberia (Schiffauer 2018a, 2018b). Extending their critical engagement with liberal modes of bio-political government beyond the writings of

Michel Foucault (1980) and Nikolas Rose (1990), these anthropologists have drawn attention to the ways that programmes of market development across the Global South produce subjects and subjectivities. Research by Catherine Dolan, Dinah Rajak (2016, 2018), Linda Scott (Dolan & Scott 2009; Scott *et al.* 2012) and Mary Johnstone-Louis (Dolan & Johnstone-Louis 2011) in eastern and southern Africa, for example, shows how the recruitment and training of young women as entrepreneurs is a form of capitalist disciplining intended to inscribe desirable traits, from readiness to timeliness, and to foster the right sort of 'interiority, reflexivity and individuality' (Chandra 2013: 94).

Sitting in on training exercises in Kenya, South Africa or Bangladesh, they show how these programmes introduce and reinforce externally constructed models of selfhood that are synonymous with liberal ideologies celebrating freedom and choice. As they show, such programmes are designed to produce precisely the kinds of enterprising, motivated, time disciplined driven salespeople that hyper-efficient markets for goods and services require. The experience is not unequivocally disempowering. At times, this research shows, the lived experience of these programmes can be empowering for participants, demonstrating the multiple ways that people secure marginal gains in status, income, or self-esteem through direct selling.

In one respect these anthropological accounts actually mirror the narratives of direct selling produced by bottom of the pyramid companies themselves. When companies and development organisations espouse the social and economic virtues of direct sales work they focus almost exclusively on the salesperson rather than the sale; framing the seller as a heroic, entrepreneurial individual. The critical accounts of direct selling produced by anthropologists do the same, putting 'the seller' rather 'the sale' centre-stage.

One consequence is that our analytical attention is often deflected from the transaction itself. Neither the accounts produced by companies nor the accounts produced by anthropologists tell us much about how salespeople *actually* sell things to people in contexts of global poverty. We know little about the play of rhetoric, persuasion or coercion that are essential to what Trevor Pinch and Colin Clark called, in their classic sociological studies of sales-craft, 'the art and tactics of the hard sell' (Pinch & Clark 1986, 1987; Clark & Pinch 2014). Nor do we know much about the forms of situated knowledge, relationships and practices upon which successful sales depend.

As the contributions to this Special Issue collectively demonstrate, however, the sale itself is rich with ethnographic insight. The moment of sale is a vital 'ethnographic moment' (Strathern 1999; Introduction, this volume). This is a moment in which people and things become visible to each other in distinctive ways and in which relationships are 'framed' in specific ways (Callon *et al.* 2002, 2005). The moment of sale, as Daniel Miller puts it, is never an alienated moment, reducible to a single encounter to which a sales agent comes naked and abstract (Miller 2002: 226). On the contrary, it is a moment in which all the seller's 'entanglements' – their 'highly qualitative and entangled judgements about looks and style, and image and feel', as well as their economic anxieties and social obligations – come into play ((Miller 2002: 227)).

These entanglements are always internal to rather than external to capitalist economies. As Laura Bear, Karen Ho, Anna Tsing and Silvia Yanagisako (Bear *et al.* 2015) have put it, drawing on traditions of post-structuralist and feminist theory (e.g Gibson-Graham 1997): life projects, a form and sense of self, family, ethnicity, race, and community are ‘always inside’ and ‘mutually constitutive’ of capitalist social relations. Such insight invites us to ask, what kinds of relationships and ways of being in the world are produced *within* the context of a market transaction rather than imposed upon it from the outside?

Over the past six years I have been considering this question in the context of markets for off grid solar technology in rural India. My research has tracked the social and material politics of these markets from industry gatherings in Delhi and Bangalore to unelectrified rural hamlets in Odisha. The ethnographic fieldwork that forms the basis for this paper began in 2012, during which I spent five months living with my family in Koraput district, returning to the area twice yearly until 2017. Over this period I have followed a small cohort of young, middle class, higher caste, Hindu men from their homes and hangouts to the market towns and villages where they were employed to sell Big Light Earth’s solar powered lamps.

The relationships and ways of being in the world that were produced in the market transactions between these solar salesmen and their lower caste (Dalit) or tribal (Adivasi) customers were, I argue, fundamentally structured by ideas about caste exceptionalism and difference; or what Gyanendra Pandey (2013) has called ‘vernacular prejudice’. This prejudice was highly ‘local and localisable’; manifested both as a kind of ‘calculated behaviour’ and as a form of unspoken bias and discrimination (Pandey 2013: 1-2). Across contemporary India (Mosse 2019, 2018), the effects of caste based, vernacular prejudice is integral to the social structuring of the market economy. As David Mosse has shown, these effects can be seen at the macro level – in patterns of access to opportunity, forms of self-employment, processes of rural-urban labour migration and workplace labour relations – and at the micro level – in the habitus of economic actors in the everyday gestures or grammar of economic transactions, where it shapes forms of forms of identity discrimination and control (Mosse 2018).

As I explore in this paper, the effects of caste based, vernacular prejudice are visible at both scales in India’s rural markets for off grid solar energy. First, they are visible in the organisation of work, which locks Dalits and Adivasis out of the new economic opportunities created by direct selling strategies. Second, they are visible in the non-verbal and verbal interactions between direct salesmen and their customers, which lock Dalits and Adivasis into lower status positions of subservience and social difference.

In India social entrepreneurship is creating new economic arenas for the performance of caste bias or discrimination. Ethnographic attention to the moment of sale, I conclude, offers an important reminder that social entrepreneurship at the bottom of the pyramid can absorb vernacular prejudice, embodied forms of advantage and structural discrimination just as it can absorb other forms of place-specific knowledge and relationships (Cross & Street 2009; Elyachar 2012; Schuster 2015).



## 'Why do They Even Need Light?'

Big Light Earth began selling solar lanterns in the highlands of Southern Odisha in 2011. Within two years the company had recruited a dozen young men in the district of Koraput to market and sell its products. These salesmen were employed part-time, paid a basic monthly salary and offered a raft of financial incentives, including a 10 per cent commission on each sale and a bonus for meeting changing, monthly sales targets.

These young men – including those I will Titu, Ganesh, Bibek, Pavak – were in their early twenties when they joined the company's payroll as sales agents. Born into Hindu families from the region's high caste or dominant, landowning caste communities (Patra and Gauda) they all grew up and were educated in or around Koraput town, the region's administrative centre. They had all graduated from secondary school and had acquired a range of additional educational certificates from private education facilities. They spoke Oriya, as well as Telugu and Hindi, but not Desiya, a trade language or lingua franca spoken by Adivasi communities across the Odisha highlands.

The cohort of young men included the sons of small-town public servants, teachers and businessmen. When I first met them, they were all unmarried and were dealing with the challenge, familiar to anthropologists of young men in South Asia and beyond, of meeting social expectations and personal aspirations within the constraints presented by formal qualifications, social networks, and economic opportunity (Jeffrey *et al.* 2008). Many, for example, blamed recent histories of personal tragedy or family difficulty for constrained economic circumstances and their inability to secure permanent, stable employment in public industries or the government bureaucracy.

None of these men used the term 'entrepreneur' or 'salesmen' to describe their work. Indeed, few of them described selling as 'work' at all or imagined that selling solar lanterns represented a long-lasting or permanent occupation. Some described their work using the English word 'timepass', a phrase used by young people across India to describe a temporary juncture, as they wait for a more secure, stable, permanent future to present itself (Jeffery 2010). Others described their positions as a 'channel' or 'source'; two other English language keywords used in India to describe paid employment as a kind of irrigation infrastructure through which future economic opportunities and security might flow (Cross 2014). Either way, 'the moment of sale' referred less to the time of a transaction than to a moment in their imagined life's trajectory.

Unlike the heroic stories that are sometimes attached to sales agents in narratives of social entrepreneurship the everyday sales work of these young men was not focused on overcoming injustice or working to uplift the poor. They were not primarily or even secondarily concerned with alleviating the suffering of strangers or building a good society. None of them saw rural energy poverty as governments, international development organisations, or companies do: that is, as a quantifiable problem that demands intervention.

Instead, these salesmen viewed their Dalit and Adivasi consumers through the prism of deeply held ideas about social difference. In Odisha access to mains electricity maps directly onto caste and tribe, with Dalit and Adivasi communities more likely to live in

conditions of energy poverty. For many scholars and historians such patterns of socio-economic inequality are a structural outcome of caste prejudice, given shape in state policies that have privileged industrialisation and urbanisation (Kale 2014; Mosse 2018). For Big Light Earth's salesmen rural energy poverty in the state was also understood in caste terms but their perspectives were deeply embedded in a caste 'habitus' (Jadhev *et al.* 2016, Mosse 2018). For the salesmen, energy poverty was a symptom of social and biological difference. For them, if Koraput's Dalit and Adivasi communities were poor it was because they were different kinds of people, with different needs.

Titu put it to me straight one day, as he stood at a Koraput market stall, waiting for passers-by to take an interest in his solar powered lights. 'Look. There are so many farmers around here. Most of them just grow vegetables and bring them to town to sell. Why do they even need light?' He stopped. The rhetorical answer was implicit: '*these people* have no real need for artificial illumination.'

Titu's statement stood out for its sharp contrast with the moralising, modernist language of Big Light Earth, whose products he was selling. Big Light Earth presented its brand name solar powered lights as empowering, emancipatory technologies, the sale of which brought light to those living in the darkness. From the perspective of Titu and his fellow salesmen, however, such a project could never succeed. To them, Dalit and Adivasi customers simply occupied and inhabited entirely different, inferior and even pre-modern lifeworlds. As I show in the following section, such ideas underpinned the segregated organisation of sales work itself.

### 'Nobody Does Sales on Their Own'

From street vending to factory labour (Mosse 2018; Anjaria 2009; Anjaria & Rao 2014, Cross 2010, 2014), access to earning opportunities in India are implicitly dependent on capital and social networks in ways that advantage 'higher' caste communities over Dalit and Adivasi communities. The most secure opportunities are unequally distributed, creating a caste-based segregation of labour. The same inequalities are reproduced in markets at the bottom of the pyramid.

In 2012 Big Light Earth sold two solar powered lighting models distinguished by little more than a fixed price and functionality (mobile phone charging, light settings, charging times). The company constantly monitored its sales figures. Each week Aseem, the regional sales manager, sent his salesmen mobile phone messages with text reminders of weekly or monthly targets, as well as details of the whole team's sales record for the previous month. These targets were a source of anxiety and stress. Failure to meet targets threatened a loss of face, income and employment. Success was celebrated with bonus payments and a 'Salesman of the Month Award'.

Big Light Earth also encouraged each of its salesmen to recruit their own network of sales agents, what the company called *sathis* or 'friends', as part of a multi-level approach to rural marketing. *Sathis* were paid a commission on each sale and were eligible for bonus payments if their sales rose above a monthly minimum. This network of *sathis* was the only way salesmen could meet their targets. As Aseem repeatedly told them, 'Nobody does sales on their own!'

Big Light Earth set minimum criteria for *sathis*. The application form required applicants to confirm they had a basic level of education and literacy, equivalent to a primary school education. On paper, such criteria created the impression of meritocratic entry into the economic opportunities created by the solar economy. In practice, however, the highest earning opportunities were captured by those with access to capital and caste networks.

Each new *sathi* was expected to purchase a minimum of 15 solar lighting units each month, with down payments made to the salesmen in cash. New *sathis* were also expected to be well connected, with ties to village level brokers and administrators, or to the salesmen themselves. As Titu put it, 'Before selecting a *saathi* I see if he has contacts. The more contacts he has in the more places the better. When I meet them for the first time, all I ask is how many people do you know and where do they live.' In rural Koraput these costs of entry into sales work had the effect of filtering out many young people from Dalit and Adivasi households, who were disproportionately likely to lack these forms of financial and social capital.

As the salesmen roamed across the hills and plateaus of Koraput, they enlisted official *sathis* through their own existing networks of kith and kin. Of the five official *saathis* that Titu recruited, for example, two were childhood acquaintances, one a classmate, two were friends of another friend. All were Gaudas, the region's dominant agricultural caste.

When the salesmen sought to extend the network of official *sathis* still further they invariably worked through other, more institutionalised networks of caste. On a visit to a new village, for example, the salesmen often took the time to meet with an elected local level administrator (the *sarpanch*). In the course of a conversation, they might ask the *sarpanch* to suggest a few names of likely salesmen.

'It's like swinging a stick in the dark', Titu once put it, suggesting there was a degree of randomness in such a strategy. Yet such efforts were often far from random and created specific opportunities for bias. In mixed caste villages across rural Koraput local government institutions are invariably controlled by politically and economically dominant castes, like the Gaudas. Attempting to recruit multi-level marketing agents through these structures was an open invitation for village level administrators to pass income generating opportunities to specific individuals and communities in ways that further secured and protected caste advantage.

Big Light Earth presented each salesman as the leader of a small, stable and successful team of *sathis* who were formally registered with the company, met its minimum criteria and were paid at fixed rates. In practice, however, each salesman also operated an informal network of sales agents who they kept 'off the books.' These unofficial *sathis* were recruited from outside each salesman's caste or friendship networks and were subject to different forms of labour discipline and risk. Unofficial *sathis* could be hired and fired on the same day, they purchased solar lamps in small numbers rather than in bulk, and they were paid a commission at the salesman's discretion. These unofficial *sathis* allowed the salesmen to manipulate the sales record. Lamps sold by multiple, unofficial *sathis* were recorded against the name of an official *sathi* or the

salesmen themselves. In doing so, the salesmen created a false portrait of high performance and generated bonus payments for reaching monthly targets which they pocketed.

These recruitment practices created two tiers of sales agents. Young men from higher castes were recruited into the first tier, where they shared in the revenue generated by sales. Young Dalit or Adivasi men were recruited into the second tier, where a higher proportion of the value generated by sales work was appropriated by the salesmen. This unequal segregation of opportunity and appropriation of value fitted a familiar pattern. The organisation of sales work in this bottom of the pyramid market reproduced the structures of caste inequality and exclusion that had shaped Koraput's agrarian economy.

Similar structures were renewed in the micro-politics of the sale itself.

### **Koraput Hustle**

'Just sell,' Aseem had told his team. But as the young men employed by Big Light Earth set out to meet this injunction they did so within parameters defined by relationships of caste, friendship and kinship. Like youth entrepreneurs elsewhere in South Asia (e.g. Jeffery & Dyson, 2013), they navigated through their economic lives with hustle and pragmatism, looking for ways to achieve a successful sale under conditions not always of their own choosing. The ambitions and aspirations of these salesmen only occasionally or incidentally overlapped with these of the company that employed them

In theory, Big Light Earth operated a rational, targeted rural distribution strategy. The company provided training materials to their sales teams that disseminated ideas for developing sales strategies by using publicly available census data on population density, village size, number of households, electrification status to identify prime locations, targeting larger, un-electrified villages with a population of over 2000. Yet while the company invested considerable resources in monitoring the achievement of monthly sales targets, it appeared disinterested in how these targets were achieved. The message, as the salesmen understood it, was clear: 'it doesn't matter who you sell to or how you sell to them, the point is to sell and meet the targets.' Little surprise, then, that the company's salesmen adopted very different strategies in practice.

In Koraput, Big Light Earth's salesmen ignored the company's formally documented guidelines. Indeed, some of them took the company's formal procedures as evidence of its relative inexperience and lack of market understanding. Instead, when they did look for advice, they turned to those people who were locally established as experts in matters of the market; people like Suresh and Kumar, who ran a mobile phone shop on the edge of Koraput bus station and acted as Big Light Earth's regional wholesaler, purchasing bulk supplies of the solar lamps and keeping them in a storage unit at the edge of town.

Where Aseem offered the salesmen a distilled version of Big Light Earth's corporate message, Suresh and Kumar offered a different set of insights; insights that they had honed in the hustle of the bus stand. Where Aseem offered access to discursive practices that had been 'produced to sell at a distance' Suresh and Kumar offered access to discursive practices that had been 'produced to sell in the circumstances' (Clark & Pinch 2014).

Hanging out in their mobile phone shop, the salesmen received one-on-one advice from Suresh and Kumar. The traders coached the young men how to speak to customers, how to organise their market stalls, and how to market a solar light lantern. ‘Look, I just try to teach them how to sell these things,’ Suresh once explained to me.

‘They have to describe the need to the customer, they have to explain the value proposition to the customer. I tell them that they or their Sathis must visit at least 15 households a day, I tell them that they or their Sathis have to make cold calls, they have to go and knock on people’s doors, brief them about the product and get their details, and then go away and given them a call three days later.’

Privately, Kumar took a dim view of the salesmen. ‘Doesn’t matter what I say,’ he repeatedly grumbled, ‘These guys don’t really know how to sell these things.’ But in public he treated them like younger brothers. He loaned them his motorbike and let them drink alcohol in the small flat he rented – away from his family home – in the town. In return, the salesmen modelled themselves around his urban style and small-town bravado.

One morning I arrived at Titu’s home as he and two other salesmen, Bibek and Ganesh, were getting ready for a market visit. Titu opened his shirt wide at the front, white vest beneath, thin gold chain around his neck. He adjusted a big Adidas belt buckle on his jeans. He sprayed deodorant on top of his shirt and then, as an afterthought, underneath.

Bibek and Ganesh sat on the steps outside. Bibek, cleaned his white trainers. He wore a purple T-shirt with a huge black and white print of Che Guavara smoking a cigar. Bibek told me he had never heard of Che Guavara but that this was his favourite t-shirt, a gift, he claimed, from a girl. He hooked a pair of sunglasses around the collar.

Ganesh rethreaded the laces through his trainers and gave them a quick polish, before attending to his hair. With his slim fit physique, pointed black leather shoes, and long, wavy black hair, Ganesh’s style was modelled tightly on his hero, Bollywood film star Akshay Kumar. Like film fans across India, his adoration or adulation was expressed not just in fashion and footwear but also in posture and speech.

Titu, Bibek and Ganesh described their work of self-preparation in terms of steeling themselves for a sale. On the street in a village or small town they often found themselves deflecting insults, comments and jokes, as their stall acted as a lightning rod for people’s frustrations or past experiences with poor quality consumer products.

Once, I watched Titu deal with three, well dressed, middle aged men who had stopped at their stall in a small market town. The passers by turned out to be government officials for the state electricity board and they quizzed the salesmen.

‘I know about products like this’, said the first man. ‘You’ll give us a one year warranty. For 364 days the thing will work perfectly and then on the 365th day it will stop working completely.’

‘Go back to your company and tell them that people around here really like this product but it’s too expensive. They need to drop the cost,’ said the second.

‘Even better,’ said the third, ‘why don’t you make us your salesman. We’ll tell you how you need to sell your products!’

The three officials collapsed in laughter.

For Titu, Bibek and Ganesh, managing such complex and sometimes awkward interactions with customers required the performance of an exaggerated masculinity.

‘We often feel like boxing someone,’ Ganesh told me that day, as we left the house. ‘But we have to be like that too. We have to be aggressive when selling. We have to be strong in our voice to convince people.’ Part of Ganesh’s strategy has been to bulk himself up in a Koraput gym. ‘Biceps, triceps, everything. Last year my body was much bigger. Now it got small.’

Salesmen like Titu, Bibek and Ganesh were acutely aware of the need to establish proximity and connection to potential customers, yet their efforts to do so were contradictory and ambivalent. They acknowledged the need to establish themselves as trustworthy. Yet to do so they drew on registers of caste and class that also entrenched forms of social distance and a lack of trust. These contradictions came to the surface most acutely as they entered rural market spaces.

## Strangers in the Market Place

Between August and November 2012, I followed the salesmen on their trips to weekly, rural markets or *haats*. The *haats* of southern Odisha – like those across central and eastern India – have implicit social and symbolic logics; with formal properties and stereotyped modes of authority assigned to different actors, buyers and sellers (Gell 1982; Gill 2009, Schwecke 2018). In these spaces Big Light Earth’s salespeople were strangers; outsiders with no prior commercial or social relationship to their potential customers. Neither salesman nor customer found it easy to assume that each other could be relied upon to behave predictably and their interactions were permeated with mistrust.. Yet to operate in the market successfully required the salesmen to produce trust and persuade people that their products were reliable. To make a sale the salesmen had to present themselves as credible, trustworthy sellers. To do so they relied on familiar idioms of caste authority and power.

The salesmen’s market visits were both regular and ad hoc. In principal they were directed by the Big Light Earth’s district level sales plan and a calendar of markets. In practice, they were never driven by these plans alone. They often drove to markets on the spur of the moment, changing their plans on a whim. One day they might decide to go because a friend was going. Another day because they had an errand for a family member.

These visits to rural markets were ‘brand building’ or promotional activities as much as selling opportunities. In any one market the salesmen might sell less than five solar lights but collect names and telephone numbers from tens of people. This exercise opened a transaction with potential future buyers; marking the beginning of a moment of a sale which might stretch over several days or weeks until it was closed. As Pavak put it, ‘Why go door to door when in the haat you can target people from twenty to forty different villages. In the haat, people from so many different villages turn up in large numbers, they see the light, some of them buy it, others go home and tell somebody else about it.’

One October morning, Titu and one of his formal *sathis*, Adhip, travelled by motor-bike to a market in the small town of Subai, around 40 kms from their home in Koraput. They reached the *haat* in the heat of midday, long after the early morning bustle had died down, with little more than a big yellow corporate branded umbrella, a handful of product leaflets and a box of lanterns.

When they arrived they identified a spot to set up their stall. The best sites were those that required no negotiations and promised to disturb as few people as possible whilst also conferring some degree of legitimacy on the sellers. The sites they preferred were usually on the outskirts of any formal market boundary but close to established shops or market traders with whom they were able to establish a familiarity.

‘It’s all about trust,’ explained Titu. ‘People will come up to us and ask, ‘If I buy one of these things, what happens if it breaks? It’s all very well having your mobile phone number but how do I know that you will help me?’ By putting the stall in front of a shop like this you can easily say to the customer, ‘Look, this trader is my friend and if you need to get in touch with me you can ask him.’

Sometimes the search for an appropriate location found the salesmen entering into longer term relationships with local traders, who liked the attention and potential customers that the solar salesmen attracted. Once, I watched the salesmen put up their stall on the side of a market street, erecting the umbrella outside a hardware stall that sold everything from plastic washing baskets to fans. The storekeeper lent them a wooden stool and metal hook for the display, before helping to set up the stall and crossing a busy road to check what it looked like from afar.

After identifying a suitable location, the next step was to build a stall. Big Light Earth provided its salesmen with giant yellow umbrellas that had a corporate logo and brand name emblazoned on the bright fabric. In the *haat* these umbrellas had their own distancing or differentiating effects. Semantically distinct from the generic blue or red plastic tarpaulins or the simple scaffolds of wooden or metal poles that marked out most stalls, the umbrellas set the solar salesmen apart from other hawkers, stall holders and street vendors, establishing them and their products as part of a discrete semiotic field. They also marked their stall as a temporary, itinerant space; one unmoored and disconnected from the normalised everyday social relations of the market.

Arriving at the *haat* in Subai Titu and Adhip picked a spot besides two men selling milled maize flour, who they had spotted on a previous trip. They stuck the umbrella in the ground, scrabbling around for rocks or bricks to steady the base. Then they laid a rice bag on the mud before taking the solar powered lights out of their cardboard boxes. They detached the solar panels from the lanterns to create the appearance of more products than they were carrying with them. Adhip carefully balanced the display, while Titu walked over to the opposite side of the road to check the aesthetic. A gaggle of young boys sauntered past and shouted out, ‘Is there something for free? Is there something going free?’

Then they waited. The salesmen rarely, if ever, called into the street to draw attention to the stall. Occasionally, they set up a battery powered sound system and played a promotional CD, with a jingle recorded and provided by Little Big Earth. This system



required more people to carry the equipment, however, and they often managed without. When they felt fresh, they paid close attention to the customers, attentive for any sign of interest. When they felt bored, they sat back and gossiped. They made prank calls on their mobile phones, shared lascivious jokes and pornographic images on WhatsApp, or offered sexist commentaries on woman and young girls they saw in the street. Sometimes they appeared to have lost all interest in the stall and potential customers might wander by, casting a look at the lamps on the ground, without the salesmen even seeming to notice. But, if a potential customer stopped, they were ready.

## Solar Talk

Market transactions between buyers and sellers in India are often accompanied by what Laura Brown (2014) has called ‘phatic’ talk: seemingly inconsequential or friendly banter and unrelated stretches of talk. Such talk, Brown argues, mitigates the implicit social and financial risks of a market transaction by creating a means for buyers and sellers to guide or comment upon the exchange, maintain their relationship and guaranteeing good future treatment. Take, for example, the transactions in a small, neighbourhood grocery shop on the outskirts of a South Indian city where Brown conducted ethnographic fieldwork. Here customers and storekeepers are well known to each other and interact on a regular, if not daily, basis. Their relationships are familiar and questions about the quality of goods or explicit reminders from shopkeepers about the need for payment are rare. In such a context, overt statements about the stakes of interactions are likely to be viewed as threatening. Transactions like this, Brown argues, are marked by the absence of actions intended to ensure good behaviour or which signal mistrust, such as the demand for explicit receipts or the resort to legal enforcement of contracts. Both buyer and seller pass off their interactions as unremarkable; and their unimportant, everyday chat sustains the assumption that each can be relied upon to behave predictably.

Such transactions sit in stark opposition to those between the solar salesmen and their customers in the highlands of Southern Odisha which were marked by the glaring absence of trust. These transactions were infrequent, unusual occurrences. They took place between relative strangers, outside the ordinary, everyday norms of exchange, and the sales talk was characterised by its directness or abruptness, even bluntness.

In markets like Subai, the interaction between the solar salesmen and their customers began with the same, simple question in Odiya. ‘What is this?’

The question drove the salesmen mad. ‘Everyone stops and asks us the same question,’ Titu said. ‘What is it?’ ‘What is it?’ Even those people who can see it is a solar light, who know exactly what it is, they still ask us the same question.’ Yet they remained softly spoken, suppressing any irritation at repeated questions or enquiries from the same customer.

The seller’s standard reply – ‘This is a solar powered light’ – was inevitably followed by a series of more detailed enquires. Customers would ask how to use the light, how to



turn it on and off, and how to charge it. They asked about its qualities: whether it was water-proof whether it charged mobile phones and whether it came with a product warranty.

In response the sellers stuck to a corporate script. They picked up a light, turning it around in their hands to describe particular features. They used the packaging as a prop, gesturing backwards and forwards between the glossy product photos and the physical object. They repeated technical details and appealed to customers as economically rational individuals, repeating phrases that they had learned by rote in the company's training sessions. 'Yes, it charges even if it rains!' 'Yes, the panel is water-proof!' 'Yes, every product comes with a one-year warranty.' 'If you buy a solar powered light you will spend less on kerosene.'

In these discussions the sellers claimed authority for themselves and their products by tacitly situating themselves within hierarchies of class and caste. Although their conversations took place in Odiya, for example, the sellers repeatedly switched to English. English language keywords like, 'light', 'bulb', 'switch', 'current' were frequently dropped into their sales patter. These words are part of an everyday language for talking about electricity in India (Cross 2017) but their deployment in these transactions was clearly intended to underline the seller's claims to superior education and status.

As in other market transactions for unfamiliar or novel commodities much of the talk in these interactions was about the quality of the object; 'about use values not exchange values' (Keane 2008). The stability or longevity of key components were described in terms that the sellers imagined might be most familiar to the customer. So, for example, the length and strength of the wire connecting the solar panel to the light was often a more significant part of many conversations than the photovoltaic qualities of the solar panel itself.

Questions about exchange value or the price of the lamp inevitably came towards the end of this interaction. Many people announced, on hearing the price, that they simply could not afford it or that the lights were too expensive. Some made attempts to bargain or haggle, or proposed that they made a down payment now and paid the remainder later.

In these interactions and negotiations it was usually the formal *sathi* who took the lead. The salesmen hung back appearing to remove themselves from the actual work of selling. This subtle division of labour was a performance of distance and superiority. The salesman established themselves as a locus of power and knowledge, in ways that was strategically deployed to add authority to the proceedings. At key moments during their pitch to a customer, for example, the *sathi* would turn to the salesman, inviting him to add to the conversation with additional detail, conveying elevated expertise. If a sale was confirmed, however, the relationship was reversed. The salesman would step forward to make the transaction and collect payment, while the *sathi* faded into the background.

In Subai, for example, Adhip stood at the stall fielding the questions from potential customers whilst Titu positioned himself at a slight remove, sitting on a motorbike. He kept an eye on the stall, tuned in to the conversations, as if managing the event from a distance in the manner of a supervisor, foreman or maistry overseeing informal labour

on a construction site (e.g. Cross 2010). When Adhip described the product's durability, however, he passed the solar light over to Titu who stepped forward to bounce in onto the ground with a practiced flick of the wrist. Each time, the lamp bounced back and Titu caught it with one hand. Such spontaneous 'tricks' were another part of a corporate script and I once watched the company's vice president do the same, on a conference stage during a trade fair for the off grid solar industry.

As outsiders in these market spaces, then, the sellers worked to signal their trustworthiness in multiple registers. As I have shown, they deployed visual and linguistic cues (in style, dress and language) that positioned them as different in both caste and class to their intended buyers and drew on the legitimacy of intermediaries (from the company itself to other traders in the market place) to vouch for them. They also established a subtle division of labour between salesmen and sales agents, establishing a hierarchy that added legitimacy to particular kinds of information and they invoked product warranties, that offered the buyer an external guarantee that their transaction involved legitimate goods.

The micro-politics of these interactions continued to play out in the space of the village when salesmen visited customers at their home to close a sale.

## Closing the Sale

The moral weight accorded to bottom of the pyramid businesses stems from the fact that they bring goods to places of chronic rural and urban poverty. Yet, the paradox of their marketing and distribution strategy in Odisha was that these were also places that their salesmen spent most of their working life trying to avoid.

Entering an Adivasi or Dalit village brought the salesmen into contact with people with whom they had little to do in most other arenas of daily life. 'Some villages are kilometres away from the road' Titu complained to me! 'How can I walk all that way carrying all the lights?' Similar sentiments were echoed by his peers. 'If I was to walk all the way to some of these out of the way places,' Pavak said, 'I'd be so tired by the time I arrived how would I work?' Where-ever possible they travelled by motorbike, borrowing bikes from brothers, cousins or each other, and avoiding public transport.

Big Light Earth presented the arrival of its solar lighting products at the point of use as a moment of empathy, attachment or connection with people living in energy poverty. But for the solar salesmen these village visits were defined by the struggle to manage and maintain a degree of social difference and distance from their customers. Most of the salesman found it virtually impossible to imagine simply turning up alone in a village. Instead they sought out people who could confer legitimacy upon their visit, whether local level administrators and politicians or religious figures.

On one occasion, for example, Titu visited a Poraja Adivasi hamlet in the village of Tentuliguda, amidst heavily cultivated fields of rice and millet some twenty kilometres from Koraput town. He drove there by motorbike accompanied by a local *pujari* or temple priest. The *pujari* was well-known in the area as a devout follower of Maa Tarani, a Hindu Goddess widely revered across Odisha, and as a seller of Ayurvedic medicines.

Titu had a list of potential customers in the village and this was his first attempt to visit them in their homes. He tracked down one of potential customers on his list: an old Poraja Adivasi man, who had expressed an interest in purchasing a lamp during one of the market promotions.

Titu stopped outside the old man's home. The pujari entered and the old man greeted him by going down on his knees and touching his feet. The pujari recited a prayer over his head before leading the man out, over the threshold of his own home, to Titu.

The old man's neighbours quickly gathered around until there was a small crowd of men at the door. Titu stood awkwardly amongst them and took the solar lantern from its box.

*Titu:* So, you see this? [He took the panel in his hands.] You place the panel on the roof of the house like this. You see this? [He uncoiled a wire from the back of the panel.] Pull it like this. See the wire! It's so long, it can go inside till your house. See this. [He gestured to the small black plastic fitting at the end of the wire, which connected it to the solar lamp.] This \*pin does the work of charging. Only that much. [He held the lamp in his hand and placed it on a wall in front of the house under the corrugated roof.] Put it properly, adjusting the stand. If you keep it here in the shade nothing will happen, okay? Even if you touch it you will not get \*current. This is \*solar light. Compare the \*bulb. It's bigger than the \*bulb you have now. [Nb. This dialogue is translated from Odiya; \* is used to denote words spoken in English.]

The old man turned away, as if distracted. Titu thrust the solar lamp into his face, commanding him to pay attention.

*Titu:* Listen! Listen! See here! [He pulled the cable out of the lamp]. You remove the pin from here. The wire will remain as it is. This is the \*switch. See! It has three different modes. See for yourself.

*Customer:* So it's 300 rupees, is it?

*Titu:* Who told you that? Tell the person who told you that to go and buy a solar lamp for 300 rupees from the town. If it gets spoiled in one year we will repair it for you and not take any money. If it gets spoilt, we will give you a new light. Okay? But don't worry! Even after five years, nothing will happen to it. The \*bulb will never fuse. The \*panel will never break. Nothing will go wrong with this for ten years. You know about the stolen \*panels that people sell? The big ones? Well, they don't get spoiled for ten years. The wire won't get damaged. But, even if it did, that would only cost you 50 rupees to repair.

*Customer:* You're sure that a replacement wire would only cost 50 rupees?

*Titu:* Ask anyone. But the \*panel and the light ... nothing will be spoiled.

The sale appeared to be closed. The old man turned around and stooped into his house. He came back holding a small wad of folded notes in his hand and, standing at the threshold to his home, invited Titu to negotiate on the price.

*Customer:* Sell it to me for 1000 rupees.

*Titu:* (Flipping the box onto its side and pointing to the label). Here is the \*MRP! We can't do anything about it!

In India the 'MRP' is a manufacturer calculated maximum retail price that an item can be sold for. Whilst Titu could not legitimately charge more than this, there was

scope for negotiating downwards. Doing so, however, would have reduced his commission on the sale and he used the packaging to signal a non-negotiable price. Getting the first customer in a village like this marked an important point for the sales team but negotiating on the price here would have meant opening up every subsequent sale to the possibility of negotiations. If just one person could be persuaded to purchase the product, others would have a chance to see it in use see it in use.

As he waited for the old man to decide Titu took the names and phone numbers of the other men gathered around. Eventually, and without further discussion, the old man extended his hand and passed the money to Titu. Reflecting on the moment later, Titu offered his summary of the exchange. ‘Other people in that village will buy the lamp because they trust the old man not because they trust me,’ he said. ‘If you can get the first, then you can get the rest.’

The concluding act in the sale was the completion of the customer warranty card. Each of the products sold by Big Light Earth came with a ‘warranty card’ and a ‘warranty registration’, that detailed the date of purchase, the product expiry date, the batch number and a company contact number. The warranty card was supposed to be filled out by the customer at the point of sale with a copy filled out by the seller at the same time and sent on to the company.

These warranty cards, ostensibly introduced to offer a degree of consumer protection against defunct or faulty products, only served to underline the lack of trust inherent in the exchange. For buyers, the cards appeared to offer what the salesmen alone could not: a guarantee that the terms of their exchange would be enforced.

In the highlands of southern Odisha, however, these guarantees could be deceptive. In the drive to meet the company’s monthly targets, some of Big Light Earth’s salesmen had established a parallel system that allowed them to register sales whenever they needed to. They removed the warranty registration cards from boxed solar lights and, when they needed to register a sale, they filled in the form and sent it off. One Sunday evening Titu filled out 60 warranty cards with random names. ‘I could just write Titu Pradhan or Titu Patnaik or Titu Anything,’ he explained, rolling off a list of high caste names. ‘These cards are just for the company to keep count of how many pieces I’ve sold.’

The consequences of such action for a buyer would not materialise for several months. But when the solar light’s switch, wires, or circuit board eventually broke down, perhaps after twelve or eighteen months, a buyer would discover that a warranty card alone could not guarantee the light would be fixed or replaced.

If these transactions were structured by a moral economy, it was the moral economy of caste: highly localised, sometimes tacit, sometimes visible. It manifested itself in the habitus of these salesmen as economic actors, in the everyday grammar of their economic transactions, and in the subtle or explicit forms of discrimination and control that appeared in the logistics and practices of selling.

## The End of the Sale

The effects of caste on the logistics and practices of direct selling described in this paper might be specific to the highlands of southern Odisha but they are not confined there.

As David Mosse (2018) puts it, the effects of caste in the Indian economy are mobile; they move across geographies and markets. Over the past five years Big Light Earth has scaled up the sales strategies and practices that it trialled in rural Odisha to other Indian states and beyond, to Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. In the process the company became one of the world's largest manufacturers and distributors of small-scale solar lighting products, with strong sales of its products across Sub Saharan Africa and South Asia. Against the backdrop of such growth we might ask, how are the structuring effects of caste in Southern Odisha more widely dispersed, or reworked into intersectional structures of class, gender and racial exclusion across global solar markets?

The outlines of these effects, I argue, are visible in the off grid solar industry's persistent representations of selling and entrenched logics of product design. The patterns of exclusion and subtle forms of prejudice that are intrinsic to the micro-politics of selling in places like the highlands of Odisha are erased from the industry's representation of these markets. Market reports and films present India's rural customers as the 'under-served' and salespeople as heroic entrepreneurs. In doing so they flatten social hierarchies and relationships of power or inequality (Cross 2018). Meanwhile, design decisions in the off grid solar industry increasingly locked the end user out of the product; restricting access to internal mechanisms and component parts in ways that limit the scope for repair (Cross 2018; Cross & Murray 2018). Efforts to expand markets at the bottom of the pyramid find the social politics of one place absorbed into design, sales and marketing practices in other places. It is a phenomenon that, as Anna Tsing has written, finds the 'non-scalable' absorbed into attempts to scale up (Tsing 2012).

Across the world for-profit businesses are working harder than ever before to connect the sale of commodities in places of poverty to universal social, economic and ecological goods. An ethnography of direct selling can expand, challenge and disrupt dominant narratives of these transactions in ways that foreground the social and material politics of markets. As I have argued in this paper, anthropologists and social analysts can extend such analyses by shifting the focus away from the person of the seller to the moment of the sale. Putting market exchange at the heart of our cultural and economic analyses reminds us that the work of selling can be 'empowering' in unanticipated ways; allowing sellers to revive, rehabilitate and reproduce modes of relational power and differential authority based on caste hierarchy, class inequality and vernacular prejudice. As I shown here, selling solar in the highlands of Odisha maintains and perpetuates an existing status quo, reproducing the hidden transcripts that sustain social and economic relationships between caste and class communities.

In rural India attempts to scale up markets for low carbon solar technology – as part of projects to extend a socially responsible, sustainable or green capitalism – hinge on the successful deployment of relationships built on difference, inequality and prejudice. Some analysts might consider these the peripheral effects of expansion and growth in emerging markets. The ethnography of direct selling in rural India presented here suggests, however, these are better understood as constitutive feature of capitalist economies at the 'bottom of the pyramid'.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council; Leverhulme Trust.

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