

3b- Admit it. You love cheap clothes. And you don't care about child slave labour

Until three years ago I did not believe in magic. But that was before I began investigating how western brands perform a conjuring routine that makes the great Indian rope trick pale in comparison. Now I'm beginning to believe someone has cast a spell over the world's consumers.

This is how it works. Well Known Company makes shiny, pretty things in India or China. The *Observer* reports that the people making the shiny, pretty things are **being paid buttons** and, what's more, have been using children's nimble little fingers to put them together. There is much outrage, WKC professes its horror that it has been let down by its supply chain and promises to make everything better. And then nothing happens. WKC keeps making shiny, pretty things and people keep buying them. Because they love them. Because they are cheap. And because they have let themselves be **bewitched**.

Last week I revealed how poverty wages in India's tea industry fuel a slave trade in teenage girls whose parents cannot afford to keep them. Tea drinkers were naturally upset. So the ethical bodies that certified Assam tea (...) were wheeled out to give the impression everything would be made right.

For many consumers, that is enough. They want to feel that they are being ethical. But they don't want to pay more. They are prepared to believe in the brands they love. Companies know this. They know that if they make the right noises about behaving ethically, their customers **will turn a blind eye**. (...) Look, they say, we are good guys now. We audit our factories. We have rules, codes of conduct, mission statements. We are ethical. But they are not. What they have done is purchase an ethical fig leaf.

In the last few years, companies have got smarter. It is rare now to find children in the top level of the **supply chain**, because the brands know this is **PR** suicide. But the wages still stink, the hours are still brutal, and the children are still there, stitching away in the backstreets of the slums.

Drive east out of Dehli (...) and take a stroll down some of the back lanes. You might want to watch your step, to avoid falling into the stinking open drains. Take a look through some of the doorways. See the children stitching the fine embroidery and beading? Now take a stroll through your favourite mall and have a look at the shelves. Recognise some of that handiwork? You should. (...)

This is the other part of the magic trick (...). The very fact that wages are so low makes the cost of fixing the problem low, too. But why make this a bad thing? Why be scared of it? Here is the shopper, agonising over ethical or cheap. What if they can do both? What if they can pluck two pairs of jeans off the rail and hold them up. One costs £20. One costs £20.15. It has a big label on it, which says "I'm proud to pay 15p more for these jeans. I believe everyone has the right to a decent standard of living. My jeans were made by a happy worker who was paid the fair rate for the job."

Go further. (...) I want to feel clean. And I want the big brands and the supermarkets to help me feel clean. I want people to say to them: "You deceived us. You told us you were ethical. We want you to change. We want you to police your supply chain as if you care. Name your suppliers. Open them to independent inspection. We want to trust you again, we really do, because we love your products. Know what? We don't mind paying a few pennies more if you promise to chip in too."

And here's the best part: I think they would sell more. I think consumers would be happier and workers would be happier. And if I can spend less time trawling through fetid backstreets looking for the truth, I'll be happier.

[Gethin Chamberlain](#) For the Guardian Sun 28 Jul 2013