

Interview with Siddharth Kara author of **TAINTED CARPETS**, Harvard University

<https://edition.cnn.com/videos/bestoftv/2014/01/22/exp-cnni-indian-carpet-slavery.cnn>

Link to Report: TAINTEED CARPETS

<https://cdn2.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/114/2017/12/Tainted-Carpets-Released-01-28-14.pdf>

Carpets woven by slaves could be on sale in some of America's best-known stores. Amazing but true, that is, at least according to the findings from the largest investigation into slavery and child labour in India's carpet industry. Based on several thousand workers, documented across nine states in northern India, 45% of carpet workers are estimated to be victims of forced labour as defined by Indian law, and 20% are estimated to be under 18 years old. The report also found cases of human trafficking and of **bonded labour**, of appalling working conditions and chronic underpayment of minimum wages. The report says it is reasonable to suggest that many aspects of the supply chain of handmade carpets from India to the United States are **tainted**.

Siddharth Kara who led this research and is one of the world's foremost experts on modern-day slavery, spoke to me about what he uncovered. Have a listen to this.

Cases of child labour and child slavery and human trafficking that we documented, I have to confess are just the 'tip of the iceberg' because our research teams took a lot of risks to try to document – and I personally took a lot of risks to try to document these cases – and the ones we were able to document were really just the bare minimum. We were often turned away violently by guards. But when we were able to document these cases I can remember going into a **shack** in rural Bihar and finding more than a dozen, two dozen young boys, ages 8,9,10, who were held, locked inside the shacks, working seven days a week, sleeping right next to where they work on these carpets and completely **held in servitude**. Adults as well. Many migrants, take an offer - what they think is a good offer with good wages working in carpets - and they will migrate from Nepal or eastern states of Jharkhand or Odisha in to the heart of the 'carpet belt'. And once they're there, again locked inside, given paltry wages if that, not allowed to leave, not allowed to take other employment, and work seven days a week, 14 hours a day.

We estimate there's roughly 2 million workers in the industry as a whole and our prevalence estimate based on this report is that about 45% of those people are caught in some form of forced labour. Twenty percent, one out of five, are child labourers. The production of these carpets – it's a multi-billion dollar industry – so the **retail value** of the carpets that were exported from India, handmade carpets to the United States, for example, last year (2013) would be between 2 and 3 billion dollars. So it's a multi-billion dollar industry employing a couple of million people, with a fairly shocking rate of exploitation – as far as our research has uncovered.

You have suggested that a boycott of handmade carpets from India isn't the way forward. If not that, what?

Well my fear vis-à-vis [with reference to] a **boycott** of handmade carpets in India is that – of course there are some carpets, plenty of carpets that are not made in these conditions – and an outright boycott might harm many of the workers who do get whatever meager wages they get and rely on that to survive. So the short-term consequences, the immediate consequences are the people we are trying to protect, who are the exploited workers could be worse with an outright boycott. So, what I am arguing for is that we convene a protocol. Take my team at Harvard, industry here in the West, in India, retailers, exporters, importers, as well as governments – come together and create a kind of **protocol** that is focused on enacting the kind of policies, laws and inspections required to address the findings of this report. So I mentioned inspections which is another very important thing. The supply chain inspections need to be significantly increased and made independent – looking at all forms of labour exploitation: penny-wage, exploitation outright down to child labour, so that we can verify that the carpets being made are not being tainted – and consumers can make enlightened choices.