

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

SAKET SONI: HOW TRAFFICKED WORKERS PULLED OFF “THE GREAT ESCAPE”

- [NARRATOR] Hours ago, minutes ago, these men were behind barbed wire, locked in the strongest cage that man could devise. These men plotted. These men dared. These men lived, "The Great Escape."

LAURA FLANDERS: That's the trailer from a World War Two movie from 1963, but it's not for nothing that labor organizer, Saket Soni, borrowed the title of that classic for his book, hundreds of men facing staggering odds, escaping captivity together, thanks to a delicately laid plan. That's the plot of the movie. It's also the story Saket Soni tells about 500 Indian-born men exploited to work as welders and pipe fitters on oil rigs off the US Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina. How did they get there? How did they escape? Saket Soni's book, "The Great Escape, A True Story of Forced Labor and Immigrant Dreams in America" tells the tale of one of the largest human trafficking schemes in modern American history, and how the traffickers were ultimately brought to account. I first met Saket Soni when he was the co-founder of the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice. In those post-Katrina years, he went on to create the National Guestworker Alliance. Today, he's the founder and director of Resilience Force, a project that grew directly out of his experience working with disaster recovery workers. Soni has been hailed as an architect of the next labor movement, and featured in The New Yorker. He's also, it turns out, a would-be theater director and a super thriller writer. The book is truly gripping. Saket, welcome back to the program.

SAKET SONI: Thank you, Laura, so great to be back in touch. Thanks for having me on.

LF: It's quite the thriller, courtroom drama, the defendant's attorney having a stroke right there in the middle. There's also a hunger strike, a march, and a whole lotta love stories. You really communicate your caring for the guys that you worked with in this case. Is there one of them you want to sort of describe for us, introduce us to?

SS: Absolutely, one of the men who wound up becoming a leader in the campaign, and a protagonist, a central character in the book is Aby Raju. Aby was a young man from Kerala, who arrived on an American promise. Recruiters arrived in India and sold him a dream. They told him that there would be a green card for him in the United States, and a good job, and then, like the others, when he got to the US, he arrived not on green cards, but on a temporary visa. Now, Aby is somebody who was from Kerala. His first job in India was to work a dollar a day fixing roofs. He then went on to become a migrant worker in Bahrain, and right at the point where the American recruiters arrived in India, his family really needed money. His dad had retired. Aby

was trying to figure out how to pay for the household. So, when a recruiter said that for \$20,000, Aby would come to America with a good job and stay on a green card, that sounded really good. Even though \$20,000 was, you know, a generation of savings, Aby had to convince his family to sell their ancestral home. They had to borrow money at high interest loans from loan sharks, but when Aby arrived, he found not an American dream, but an American nightmare. He found himself, like everyone else, in atrocious conditions. The men who arrived from India lived 24 to a trailer in a facility that the company itself called a man-camp. It was a set of trailers built above a toxic dump. They were fed frozen rice and moldy bread, but Aby's greatest indignity was one I found out about only when I got to know him a lot closer. It was the day he was 20 feet up, doing dangerous welding work on an elevated platform, and he got a phone call. He picked up, and it was his wife. He had just been married, and his wife, Bincy, was going into surgery. She was pregnant, and not only could he not be with her, but he wouldn't even get to see the son that she had that day, the son that was born to them that day in person for another three years. And that was the day that later on, Aby recounted, the day he broke, the day that represented the greatest offense in the labor camp, and the day that made him join the campaign.

LF: When did you first hear from these workers?

SS: I first got a mysterious midnight phone call on my birthday in 2006. It was a mysterious caller who was too scared to give me his name, but I could tell from the way he spoke, and especially from the way he said my name, that he was from India. Now, I got phone calls all the time from laborers around the Gulf Coast, but most of them were either African Americans or white workers, local workers from the Gulf Coast or they were Latino immigrants, and I wondered to myself, what on earth was an Indian man doing in the ruins of the post-Katrina, Mississippi Gulf Coast? What I discovered was that he was one of 500 Indian laborers who had been lured to the US on the promises of good work and green cards.

LF: How did you work with them to get them to become the activists that they were, or were they, at a kind of latent level, activists? I mean, they'd reached out to you, which was quite something, but they were in a very perilous position.

SS: My first meeting with them was a disaster. You know, during that mysterious phone call, the man who wanted help was too scared to talk to me, but he told me to meet him clandestinely at a place he called, in his particular English, the secret Catholic church. I went on a hunt, and it turned out to be the Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Pascagoula, Mississippi, a small town, a small shipyard town. I went in to meet with these workers. Opened the door expecting three workers, and there were a hundred. There was one man who was deep in the audience, who then reached out to me, a man named Rajen, and this is the one I ended up partnering with, one of these workers. Rajen was the kind of partner a labor leader dreams of. He taught me the inner workings of the camp. He taught me the pressures on these men. He also taught me, Laura, how

to cook, and over the course of months and meals, we orchestrated this escape out of a heist movie.

LF: The men that you work with are the center of the story, and your relationship with them, their relationship with each other, with their families. Zoom out though and you have this structure of interconnected bad guys, if you like. Describe, if you would, the relationship between the recruiters, the corporation, and ultimately, I hope I'm not letting too much out of the bag here, US authorities.

SS: The workers arrived in the United States to build oil rigs for a large, Gulf Coast oil rig builder. This company was private equity owned, and it was, you know, like a juggernaut. There were contracts after contracts, a long pipeline, and so this company was really receiving the most skilled workers in the world through this trafficking scheme at a fraction of the cost of US workers.

LF: We can name names. I mean, we're talking about Signal International. There was a lawsuit. People can check the archives.

SS: That's right, Signal International, giant, sprawling and growing behemoth of an oil rig builder, but the way the workers got there is a very fascinating story. At the center of it is an immigration attorney in New Orleans named Malvern Burnett, and in the book, I say Malvern Burnett always thought of himself as the immigrant's best friend. He was the last person you'd expect to find in federal court, denying his role in one of the largest human trafficking schemes in modern US history. So, that is the strange part of the story, the immigrant's best friend winding up at the center of a forced labor ring. So, after Hurricane Katrina, Malvern Burnett found himself in a personal financial crisis, and he entered into this scheme to provide these workers to the company, and made millions of dollars in the process. It was a Faustian bargain.

LF: None of this would have been possible if there hadn't also been laws permitting immigrants to be brought into this country on special visas. The whole thing was propped up by that opening in the legal system. Talk a bit about that because I do want to emphasize that while there are individual heroes here, there's also some structural problems that, in fact, your Resilience Force project has set up to address, but let's go back to where did government come in, and the legal structure and our immigration laws.

SS: Well, you know, Malvern Burnett was an expert on the United States' intricate and largely, very difficult to understand immigration system. So, when the company, Signal International, said, "Look, we need workers for years. How fast can you get us a workforce that can, you know, come from India, work for us, and build oil rigs for years?" Malvern knew that the fastest way to get these workers was not on green cards. That's nearly an impossibility, but on temporary,

short-term visas. These are visas that are meant to solve a temporary labor need. Of course, the company's labor need was not temporary, and the workers were told they were coming on green cards, but in fact, they were brought by this recruiting trio on something called an H-2B visa, a temporary, short-term visa that allows workers to come in, work for some months at a time, but after the work was done, they would need to go back home to India. That's not what the workers were expecting, but that's what they were, you know, that's what they were brought on. The other government actor here was an even stranger one, the ICE agent, and the whole system of immigration enforcement helped keep these workers in forced labor. Without giving too much away, a person right at the center of the scheme is an ICE agent, an immigration cop called Alvin Ladner. This ICE agent had his own personal motivations for surveilling and hunting down and attempting to jail and deport the men.

LF: I learned in this a little bit about you. You tell some of your own story that I certainly didn't know, including that you had once wanted to be a theater director.

SS: My parents were probably the only ones in the history of India to let their son go to America for a theater degree, but that's what I was doing when, when I missed an immigration deadline of my own. I became undocumented, and I really thought nothing of it. I thought it was only a little more serious than an unreturned library book, but then 9-11 happened, and like many many immigrants in the United States, I lost my foothold in America. That's what turned me from theater to community organizing.

LF: I can't help thinking that you brought some of your kind of theater skills, talents, instincts, to the organizing. I'm thinking particularly of the scene where you win over the guy who was perhaps the most reluctant, who's acting sort of as a snitch, as an information gatherer for the company at one of the most important meetings that you have with the organizers.

SS: At a key moment in the book, the company finds out that something's afoot, that there are activists among the workers, people who are seeking out the advice of an outside character, me, that we're holding secret meetings. And the company actually attempted to deport my leaders in the labor camp. The reason they did that was because of a few snitches they had among the workforce. What I had to do was convince those informants, the workers who were colluding with the company, you know, to really join me, to look at the company, understand that it was all lies in the first place. There were never any green cards, and join me, and the key character that I had to convince was a young man who was also from North India, and in fact, also from Delhi, from the same city as me. And when I was imagining what he looked like, I expected, you know, some kind of bully. In fact, this was a very handsome, Bollywood star looking son of a police officer named Hamath. He was, you know, really very striking, really charismatic, and it was easy to see why people followed him. He was, he led a whole crew of workers in the labor camp,

all from North India, and it was really important for me to bring the North Indians on board so that everybody would join the campaign.

LF: We're talking about the book, "The Great Escape," but also the story of how 500 Indian-born workers managed to break out of captivity-like conditions in working camps and man-camps in Mississippi and in Texas in order to to assert their rights, and ultimately did bring the traffickers to account. There was a \$14 million settlement in one group of cases, \$20 million in another. It's an extraordinary story. I can't help feeling it's like one of the biggest, most important labor stories most people have never heard of. Looking back on it now, Saket, I see so much here that is important, and I also wonder how much has or hasn't changed. On the one hand, the relationship between ICE, our immigration, authorities, our laws, and the corporations that benefit off this kind of labor, has anything changed? Secondly, on the side of the organizers, you are bringing together civil rights organizers with activists coming from India. You are referring before the end of the book to the British Imperial experience and their importation of coolies to take the place of formerly enslaved Africans after abolition. You have a very global scope, and yet, we are in a country that organizes typically quite parochially, and perhaps was doing that at that time. Where are we today, do you think, both on the sort of good guys side, and on the opponents' side? What's changed?

SS: Well, I'll start with what's changed for the man at the center of the book. Aby Raju, the worker I talked about, who was on that platform 20 feet in the air when his son was born 10,000 miles away. At the end of the book, there's this beautiful scene of Aby at the Atlanta Airport, and his wife, Bincy, holding their now three-year-old son, coming up the escalator, and they embrace. They reunite. They meet for the first time. Aby hugs his son, and they start their American lives. And actually, just a few months ago, Aby sent me a picture of himself and Bincy as first-time voters, not just in the US, but as first-time voters in any country, in Houston during the last US midterms. So, these men are now in America. They're fully Americans. They're recognized as such. They're going to their citizenship ceremonies. These workers in this book, though I didn't know it at the time, were the first of a growing workforce that I call the Resilience Workforce, workers who rebuild after hurricanes, floods, fires and other disasters. And as climate change has proceeded, as disasters have become more frequent and more destructive, this workforce has grown, and it's largely still immigrant and largely undocumented, and very vulnerable. And just like these workers in this book, newer immigrants who come in to this workforce follow hurricanes, floods and fires. They follow disasters and I follow them with my team, and we protect them. I've come to see them as America's white blood cells. They're right at the center of rebuilding and repair and healing. They're the best shot we have for people coming home, but they're still, you know, unrecognized and vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. One of the hopes that I have for this book is that it'll spur more people to say, "Well, how can I help? How can I make sure that people like that have the dignity they deserve?"

LF: What needs to change? I mean, on a purely, self interested level, you've got an aging US population, a declining now Chinese population. You've got the climate crises you just mentioned, and we've just seen what happens when you have the kind of dislocation to the global economy that we're still reeling from on the level of markets and also migration, shortage of workers, people are constantly complaining about. What needs to change, purely for the survival of the US economy, do you think, when it comes to the more mobile movement of global labor?

SS: Well, what I see in my work every day is exactly the kinds of solutions that I think are needed at a global level or at a national level. In small towns and large cities across America, after a flood or a fire or a hurricane, immigrant workers roll in, right? And these are often towns where the number one priority of the local population and the local political leadership before the hurricane was building a wall to keep immigrants out. Places like Florida, where Hurricane Ian hit just months ago, weeks before the hurricane, DeSantis had shipped migrants to Martha's Vineyard and Kamala Harris' house in Washington, and after the hurricane, DeSantis' constituents, those very people who cheered him on now needed those migrants back to rebuild their homes and schools and cities after a massive hurricane. And you know what? They're working together now. I see friendships form between the US-born and the immigrant workers. I see the gratitude of local mayors, mayors who are deeply conservative and cheering on deportations suddenly turn and all they have is gratitude for the immigrant workers. I think that's what we need at a national level is systems of repair and rebuilding, not just an immigration system, but systems of repair and rebuilding this country that are focused on solving problems, and that band people together to solve those problems. And out of that problem solving also comes new friendships that are bases for our new resilience, the resilience we need for the future we need, you know, we need to face.

LF: And the people on that resilience force, what rights do they have? What protections?

SS: Well, right now, they have very little. Right now, they have only what we can win for them. These workers wake up in their cars or they sleep and wake up under their cars on Home Depot parking lots. They wash themselves with bottled water, and then, before dawn, they get to work, rebuilding homes and roofs and schools and cities. They often fall off those roofs. They return home often without pay. When they come forward and push to be paid by contractors who owe them, you know, they have to risk punishment. Contractors often call the police or threaten to call immigration. That's the system we have now. That's the world as it is, but it's not the world that we want, and it's not the world we need to have. In reality, we need these workers. We need them to be safe and skilled and secure. We also don't have enough of them. What we're really trying to do at Resilience Force is build this million-strong, massive, skilled workforce we need to rebuild American cities, but also to build new fabric, new social fabric in America.

LF: Our guest is Saket Soni. He's the author of "The Great Escape, A True Story of Forced Labor and Immigrant Dreams in America." It's just out. We'll have a link at our website. Saket, thank you so much for coming back on the program and congratulations on a fantastic story, brilliantly told.

SS: Thanks, Laura.

LF: Saket Soni is a great storyteller, and he tells many more stories about the workers and the settlement they ultimately reached with Signal International in the full, uncut version of today's conversation, which you can get through a subscription to our podcast. At the end of the day, the workers do win in court and Signal International has to pay. The company declares bankruptcy, and you could say that the story ends there, but does it? As I was hearing Saket talk about Aby, the trafficked worker at the top of that damaged rig, hearing about the birth of his son miles away, I'm reading about the extraordinary windfall profits being reported by Exxon Mobil and Chevron and the world's biggest oil companies. \$55.7 billion for Exxon Mobil, Chevron not far behind, is the problem a few criminally-minded, exploitative people in this industry or the entire political economy of oil, an economy that rests on exploitation and extraction, and generates private profits for its shareholders while walking away from the damage to public lands and soil? Is the problem a few people or a political economy, and if it's the latter, how do we shift it? We'll continue to look at both the people problem and the political economy problem here on "The Laura Flanders Show," and I hope you'll join me. So, check out the full conversation by subscribing to our podcast, and come back here next time. I look forward to our next conversation. Till then, stay kind, stay curious. For "The Laura Flanders Show," I'm Laura, and thanks for joining me.

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