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Interview with Sangu Iyer

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **SANGU IYER** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 231.*

ALESSANDRA: Sangu Iyer gives us our next interview, and I've gotta say that it's a super awesome one. Sangu is the author of *The Lines We Draw*, a recent publication of Our Hen House's newly launched eBook publishing arm, Hen Press. If you haven't yet read this eBook, I couldn't recommend it any more highly. It's a story about boundaries and the psychological implications of chimpanzee research. Sangu talks all about the book and more in this next interview.

JASMIN: Welcome to Our Hen House, Sangu.

SANGU: Thank you, Jasmin and Mariann.

JASMIN: We're so excited to have you here today. As Mariann was saying, we were completely serious, we're big fans of the way you think and we feel so lucky to be working with you as an author.

MARIANN: Yeah, absolutely. And I want to talk to you a little bit about the work in the clip we just saw. But first I'd really like to get to the book you've recently written, *The Lines We Draw*. And it's really a fascinating study, and it originally grew out of a conversation you had with Alfred Prince. Can you tell us a little bit about him and about how you came to talk to him?

SANGU: Sure. I first want to say it's just been such a pleasure working with you both on this book project. It's been really wonderful.

MARIANN: Thank you.

SANGU: So Alfred Prince, he is a hepatitis researcher working with chimpanzees, and he started his work in the '70s at NYU's laboratory, LEMSIP.

MARIANN: A notorious place.

SANGU: A very notorious place. And there, the chimps were kept in very, very tiny cages alone and he was very troubled by those conditions. So he decided to move the laboratory to Liberia and he was working for the New York Blood Center. And there he developed conditions where he could house them in groups and have some outdoor use, but as you see in the piece it's not without ethical complications.

JASMIN: Not at all.

MARIANN: Yeah, it's so interesting because as you point out in the piece, we tend to think of people who experiment on animals as being very detached and not having any feelings. But you found his situation to be exactly the opposite, which is one of the reasons he decided to remove himself from LEMSIP and move to Liberia. But how did that play out? It seems like such a contradiction in terms.

SANGU: Yes. And it's very interesting. He also mentions the head of LEMSIP, Jan Moor-Jankowski, and I was reading up more about him as well and these are two men who are prominent in their fields and have made their living on this research. But you did see that they were troubled by this. And I think at NYU the decisions that were made were misguided, like Moor-Jankowski thought leaving them alone they wouldn't fight, not giving them toys meant it'd be more hygienic, but it just led to such psychosis. And with Prince, he moved to Liberia but he had all the same problems as you have here. It's like, where do you get the chimps? And he had to wild capture chimps first, and that means targeting a chimp family in the wild and stealing their babies. And he didn't want to do it legally 'cause previously they would shoot a mother chimp and steal their babies, so they tried a non-lethal anesthesia. But it takes a while for that to kick in, so there was one chimp that they shot and climbed 100 feet and then fell to his death, so all these things were very, very messy.

MARIANN: It's so often what you find out when you're dealing with animals, people try to find a good way to do it. There may be a less worse way to do it, but there's no good way to do it.

SANGU: Right.

MARIANN: One of the most eerie parts of the story I think was his relationship with Mary. Can you talk a little bit about that and how you felt when he spoke about it?

SANGU: Yeah. So we met at a restaurant in the Upper East Side and he brought with him photos of Liberia and the chimps. And I was really struck by one of the captions on the photos, which was of Mary and it said, "Who could not fall in love?" And so I thought that was strange. I'm here meeting him to talk about his research and "love" is the word he used to describe one of his test subjects. And he told me a little bit about Mary, and he had passed away a few years back and he also wrote his own memoir where he also talks about Mary. And he had this bizarre fantasy of mating with Mary and having a child that he would call "Manzee," like a hybrid of a chimpanzee and a man.

JASMIN: When did you first find that out from him, that this was -- Did he tell you this?

SANGU: He told me this.

JASMIN: And you're sitting there enjoying a falafel or whatever.

SANGU: Right, and I'm having my lemonade, and it's not strong enough.

JASMIN: How does one react to that? I mean, that's just mind-blowing.

SANGU: Well, he told me he was writing his memoir, so I was like, wait a minute, is this fiction? You know, this is like his fantasy, he was writing a novel that was separate from this other work of his life. And he had told me that he believed that potentially he thought it was an interesting idea.

JASMIN: And nothing, that there seemed to be something kind of off ethically or mentally, I don't know.

MARIANN: But I mean it turns out that these relationships are a lot more complicated than we tend to think of them as.

JASMIN: It's so startling.

SANGU: Yeah, definitely. And it's interesting because I think -- and when I was reading his memoir he came to the conclusions that perhaps chimps and humans are the same species, and he thought if they mated and they had children and the children weren't sterile, 'cause that's usually what happens when you have these hybrid species, that we would be the same species and then it would have ethical implications for research. And I'm like, there's also ethical implications of this whole scenario.

MARIANN: Yeah. And there are ethical implications even if they're not the same species. What does that have to do -- It's so odd.

JASMIN: Yeah, well, I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the advances that have been seen for chimpanzees in this country of late because you know quite a bit about this. Can you tell us a bit about it?

SANGU: Sure. There have been a couple of developments just in this past year. This summer, two federal agencies made big announcements about the fate of chimps in US labs. You had the National Institutes of Health, after a previous study that the National Academy of Sciences Institute of Medicine conducted, they came to the conclusion that chimpanzees in medical research are scientifically unnecessary for the most part, which is a big deal for these federal agencies to admit that.

MARIANN: It's huge! Absolutely unbelievable. I was flabbergasted when it happened. It was a step forward.

SANGU: Yeah, and they decided that they are going to retire most of their chimpanzees and reduce the number that they have, which is a big deal. The US is still behind other countries that have banned this practice, but that's a big deal. The other thing is chimpanzees in the wild are an endangered species, and it was just also really sad when you think about us having this six million year shared history and in the last 30 or 40 years we've really messed things up for them. But captive chimpanzees weren't granted that endangered status. And the Fish and Wildlife Service, which regulates the Endangered Species Act, in the summer, concluded that we really can't separate the captive chimpanzee from the wild chimp and captive chimpanzees should be considered endangered too, which has implications.

MARIANN: That has enormous legal implications. No, there's a lot of progress for chimpanzees. Unfortunately, not so much on the factory farm front, and I did want to get to

your work because I know you do enormously important work talking about the growth of factory farming worldwide. Can you tell us a little bit about what's going on in India?

SANGU: Sure. So I've been doing some research with the environmental action tank Brighter Green and we had done case studies on the growth of factory farming in India and China and Brazil and Ethiopia. And India, many people are very surprised by...

JASMIN: Right, 'cause they revere their cows, or that's what it's said to be. But what's going on there, briefly?

SANGU: So India is not a majority vegetarian country anymore. The number is maybe 30-40% vegetarian. You have a lot of growth going on in India. You have urbanization, globalization, you have this growing middle class that's having an increasing appetite for animal products, particularly in the chicken sector and in eggs.

MARIANN: Both eggs and poultry meat.

SANGU: Yes. And we'll get to cows in a bit. I had gone to India in 2009 and visited various battery cage egg farms as well as poultry farms and a chicken slaughterhouse. And it's really bizarre 'cause India's in this weird transition and it's at this very interesting crossroads. And what was really fascinating again, these are these very complicated stories where I was guided to these facilities by these self-called poultry barons, who they themselves were vegetarians, they themselves did not eat eggs, and yet they were in this industry. And we went to a chicken slaughterhouse, which was very difficult for me but there was also this very Indian hospitality, so you go to the slaughterhouse and there's a meal prepared for you and it's a vegetarian meal because the manager is a vegetarian.

MARIANN: It seems like a transition in such the wrong direction.

SANGU: Exactly.

JASMIN: What about cows?

MARIANN: Because cows have a special place in Hinduism.

SANGU: Yeah, so there's a lot of, cows are revered.

JASMIN: Right, they seem so -- that's what everyone says. I mean, I haven't been, but...

SANGU: The reality, there is a disconnect. So you have, beef is prohibited in most states, but there is slaughter in some states and there's also a vibrant illegal trade. But India is a large beef producer just because it has this huge cow and buffalo population, 300 million, the largest in the world. And what is happening is that it has a huge dairy industry, it's the world's largest dairy. And the fate of those cows is they're in the dairy, when they're no longer productive either they're illegally shipped to slaughter or they're let go on the streets. That goes the same for their male calves. And many of them are, the fate once they're on the street is they are foraging through garbage on the street, they might be taken and shipped somewhere where it is legal to slaughter, they might be taken somewhere illegally slaughtered, sometimes beef is sold as mutton on the market. And then the government is also rounding up these cows from the street. So I think there's like this notion like, oh the

cows are on the streets, everyone cares about them. But no one's really questioning how they got there, and the dairy industry plays a large part in that.

JASMIN: There's so much to talk about with this. And I definitely want you to come back and talk to us more about this, but I have a personal question 'cause I know that you live here in Brooklyn and you love it here in Brooklyn. And you brought us some food to try today, and I want to just -- tell me what you brought us. I'm grabbing this and bringing it out for us.

SANGU: Okay. So I brought two different things. First we were talking about the availability of vegan options in non-vegan places, and one thing that has been popping up all over Brooklyn are these Vietnamese sandwich shops with banh mi. And this is from a place in Park Slope called Henry's, I think probably near you guys.

MARIANN: It is very near, we've had their faux pho.

SANGU: The faux pho is amazing. But they also have sandwiches and they have tofu options, vegetarian ham.

JASMIN: So this is that sandwich.

SANGU: Yes.

JASMIN: Okay, so it is interesting that you're saying that you can get a lot of vegan options at non-vegan restaurants here in Brooklyn. This is something we talked about recently with Piper Hoffman. So what is this that I'm now generously spooning?

SANGU: So now this is from a vegetarian restaurant, a new vegetarian restaurant, Hartwell Vegetarian.

MARIANN: Oh, we have not made it there yet, but this looks amazing.

SANGU: And I just moved to Kensington a couple of years ago and this is a big exciting new joint. It's in Ditmas Park, it's on Cortelyou near Coney Island Avenue and you can get these lovely platters with assorted veggies and soy proteins and it's quite delicious.

MARIANN: Amazing.

SANGU: Both of these things, we're in spring but summer's gonna be around the corner. And I love --

MARIANN: This is very good.

JASMIN: They're both very good. And the problem with having people like Sangu on is that there's so much we want to talk to her about and we could just eat instead.

MARIANN: I have barely scratched the surface of what I want to talk to you about.

JASMIN: Well, I hope that people check out *The Lines We Draw*. And also you were talking a lot about Brighter Green, and you could learn more about that at brightergreen.org. And you could learn more about Sangamithra Iyer and her work at sangamithra.wordpress.com. And you could read the lines we draw at ourhenhouse.org, and you could purchase it on

Amazon, Barnes & Noble, or Apple's iBooks. So thank you so much for joining us today, Sangu.