

Journalist, comic Sopan Deb handles hard truths of immigration, family with humor in ‘Missed Translations’

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Sopan Deb, journalist, comedian and author of “Missed Translations.” (Amy Lombard)

By [Carla Bell](#) 

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“When we think about choice, we think about agency,” said Sopan Deb, New York Times journalist and author of the new memoir “**Missed Translations: Meeting the Immigrant Parents Who Raised Me,**” in a recent interview.

In “Missed Translations,” the culmination of a yearlong project that began in 2018 and took the author from New York to India, Deb peels back 30 years of a generational, cultural and familial struggle so well known to immigrant communities. On an adventure of reacquaintance with his parents, Deb learns for the first time who they really are. A stand-up comedian, Deb skillfully navigates unsettling truths with humor and transparency.

“My mother, she’s never gone on a date in her life. She’s never been proposed to,” Deb said. “She didn’t want to marry my father.” Learning this made Deb all the more empathetic toward his mother Bishakha’s plight. His parents immigrated to the United States separately and were brought together in a failed marriage. When they divorced, Deb’s father Shyamal left the family and returned to India to stay.

For the South Asian family, a culture of silence around mental illness meant his mother wasn't there for Deb growing up, literally locking herself away within the family home for extended periods of time. She regrets it. In a note years later, Bishakha wrote to her son, “When you were a child, you did not have a normal life like others. I wish I could do better for you.”

Difficult talks with his father brought introspection, Deb said. “My mind was swimming during these conversations,” many of which were reconstructed in the book exactly as they happened. “There was just so much to take in.”

In Deb's writing — a compilation of recordings, videos, quotes and many notes — he bridges the distance between his own severely damaged family relationships, setting this memoir apart in the genre as a kind of open diary. What's a surprise to the reader was a surprise to him too.

News of his arrest in Chicago, broadcast around the world in Kolkata, for instance — that was a surprise.

While covering a Donald Trump campaign rally and its counterprotest in 2016 for CBS News, Deb was suddenly thrown to the ground and arrested as cameras rolled, capturing his voice as he identified himself and his role. Charges were quickly dropped.

Just after the ordeal, Shyamal called. “‘You're in every newspaper in India. MY SON IS A STAR!’ — and that's the first time my dad ever figured out what the hell I do with my life,” said Deb.

But that experience elevated Deb's profile, leading him to The New York Times, where he covers culture and basketball.

Throughout Deb's childhood, his father knew nothing about his two loves: basketball and baseball. “Year after year, my dad showed up at Little League games, not knowing the rules.” Shyamal would see him strike out, then applaud with proud remarks like “That's my boy!” Deb would strike out often, he admits in the book.

Deb, now 32, grew up “the lone brown kid” in the mostly white suburb of Howell, New Jersey. He says he always felt like an outsider. Of his freshman year of high school, he

writes, “I was singularly focused on fitting in on campus.” In his graduating class of about 500 students, he was still the only brown kid.

So a boy of Indian descent became a chameleon in a sea of white, an adaptation that propped him up on one side, among his mostly white peers, but tore him down on the other, among his family, particularly his father, almost 50 years his senior.

“The cultural gap was widened further by my father’s pride in being an immigrant,” he writes. “His upbringing in India never yielded to American simulation. I saw his pride as a burden.” For his father, this nation meant an easier way to survive. For Deb, it meant reaching for more. “I aspire to live,” he said.

Deb’s childhood ideas were laid out according to the blueprint of the American dream, his hopes set upon whiteness which he’d equated with being American. Irrational and unjustified, he knows now — but a reasonable conclusion, even inevitable, in the mind of a second-generation South Asian child immersed in a nearly exclusively white American experience. Asked whether “fitting in” back then meant toning down his true self, Deb said, “I don’t think I knew who the real me was.”

Whether in defense or for survival, it’s clear in speaking with Deb, and in his storytelling, that his reflexes are trained to bring his best self to the stage, in as many versions as necessary. “Missed Translations” showcases those instincts with stories of charm, pride and sorrow — but you’ll laugh, too.

Through the making of “Missed Translations,” Deb said he was finally able to release much resentment toward his father. “This journey was as much about forgiveness as discovery,” he said. “This book is for anyone who has a relationship they think can be better.”

He’s still processing it, but through the events of that year, Deb came to understand more than ever before about his father, and about his mother, who is in a better place now. She’s completely different after this experience. They all are.

“Missed Translations: Meeting the Immigrant Parents Who Raised Me” by Sopan Deb, HarperCollins, 257 pp., \$27.99

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