

## **Chickpeas to Cook and Other Stories**

Nilanjana Sengupta  
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In her latest book, *Chickpeas to Cook and Other Stories*, critically acclaimed Singapore-based Indian writer Nilanjana Sengupta takes us beyond the traditional images of Singapore as a vibrant metropolis and wealthy financial hub to a more sensitive, compassionate and humane domain: to the brighter side of Singapore. In it, she explores the religious and spiritual experiences of Singapore's often overlooked and marginalised minority women from the smallest of the small communities within its eight sacred folds. The author proffers that underneath its sterile rationalism and soul-destroying industrialism, Singapore shares an animating principle, a law of the heart, which brings clarity, vibrancy and naturalness to many of its residents and fullness to the nation. The book is Sengupta's creative attempt to, rephrasing Ralph Waldo Emerson, hitch Singapore's "wagon" to the "star" and show the soul's constructive role in the scheme of the nation's Whole.

In her "Author's Note," Sengupta acknowledges that her inspiration for the book came from an experience in childhood when, at the age of six, she, for the first time, came to realise that there is an inherent unity in this seemingly fragmented world and a universal essence pervading all human beings makes every individual part and parcel of one omniscient God. She bolsters this mystical theme by naming the book after Rumi's poem, "Chickpeas to Cook," and borrowing a line from it as her epigraph. She also appropriates Rumi's culinary metaphor as a focal theme: like the raw chickpeas need steaming in a curry to make them soft and flavoursome, so do human beings need to be spiritually "cooked" in the flame of divine love to soften their hearts and make them worthy of heavenly bliss.

The book is written in an elegant style and lofty prose, drawing on the author's research and interviews with community members she presents. It has eight "stories" or chapters, each partly planned and partly spontaneous, simultaneously engaging the author's creativity and intellect. Every episode has the same five segments and a female protagonist, as the two primary objectives of the book are to explore the spiritual teachings of the religions incorporated in it and the circumstances of women within those religio-cultural clans.

Each episode begins with an extract from the scripture of the religion presented in it, followed by an overview of its central assumptions. Then there is a historical account of a small ethnic community within the faith group: how and when they arrived in Singapore and how they maintain their religious-ethnic identity in an ever-modernising and globalising island nation. Next, the author introduces her main contact person, her protagonist, a woman within the community whom she has met, observed and interviewed over a period, considering her as her "mita" or friend. Finally, based on her experiences with this contact person, she tells a story about the latter, her family and her community to show how her faith has helped her find balance, patience and peace in a world driven by falsehood, greed and self-indulgence.

The first four segments of every chapter are mainly factual, gleaned from the author's research and observations, but couched in a language that shows her unambiguous admiration for the religions. However, the last section verges on the fictional, where Sengupta shows her creativity and literary brilliance by telling the stories in a radiant style and prose and in multiple voices and forms, moving from one to the other seamlessly. Her narrative voices range from the first-person to the third-person and sometimes in a mishmash of both, and her form varies from sequential and causal narrative to epistolary and dramatic.

The religions and ethno-communities probed in the book are Islam and the Dawoodi Bohra Muslims in chapter one; Judaism and its small orthodox and non-orthodox flock in chapter two; Hinduism and the Nattukottai Chettiars in chapter three; Christianity and its Singapore-Eurasian followers in chapter four; Sikhism and its Singapore adherents in chapter five; Buddhism and the Theravada Buddhist-Burmese population in chapter six; Taoism and the Chinese-Taoist community in chapter seven, and Zoroastrianism and the Singapore Parsi community in chapter eight.

Some of the religions explored in the book, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Taoism, Islam and Hinduism, have a sizable following in Singapore, varying between a few million to several hundred thousand, but instead of delving into their larger laity, the author concentrates on a lesser-known and somewhat invisible ethnic group to show how they cope with their faith and identity in a country where the government-orchestrated racial policy recognises only four categories of the population under its CMIO rubric: Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others – a colonial legacy that Singapore has continued to champion since independence as a way of augmenting its racial integration and harmony, ignoring the unique values and lifestyle of the smaller groups. Such an approach may be acceptable from a pragmatic viewpoint, but it may appear unjust from the humane and humanitarian perspective the author champions in the book.

To publish a work celebrating religious diversity, inclusivity and harmony in the era of post-truth and alternative facts, when inter-religious and communal hatred is constantly on the rise, is no mean feat, and the author ought to be commended for this heroic effort. It positively demonstrates Sengupta's pluralistic, altruistic and ecumenical worldview. I would recommend the book to anyone interested in Singapore literature, culture and history, interfaith dialogue, multiculturalism, gender discourse, minority literature or mysticism and its foundational tenets of *Advaita* and *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* illustrated in Hindu Upanishadic texts but also frequently thematised in the canonical works of all the religions foregrounded in this book.

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