

Defying the tyranny of the tastebuds

What makes people shun the pleasures of chicken and chocolate and voluntarily go on diets of sugarcane juice and green *idlis* made of sprouts? Ashwini Sukthankar meets some of Mumbai's food faddists and finds out about this new health-food trend

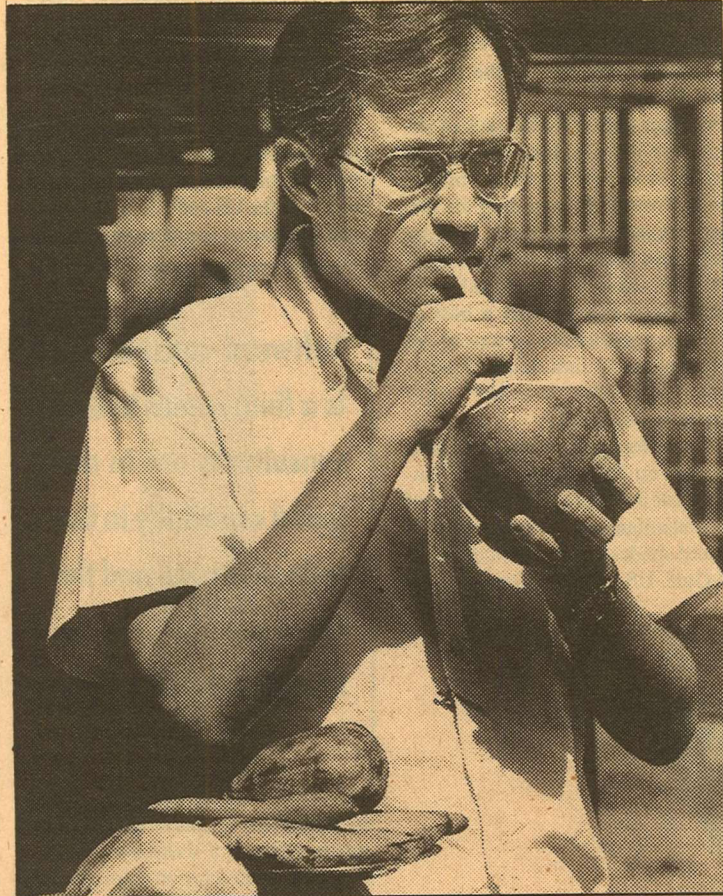
BREAKING bread together" is more than just a cliché — when people gather together to celebrate a wedding or discuss a political agenda, it is almost guaranteed that food will be provided. So when some of us choose to go against society's eating norms, it's a challenge to social order. In their most extreme forms, changing attitudes to food seek to reshape the world with gentle anarchy, a kind of civil disobedience.

It's not hard to find people who have decided to change their philosophy of food. Though it's tempting to dismiss the phenomenon as a part of the "food fad" movement born in America — the glorification of oat bran, the demonisation of dairy products — the movements here choose to lay claim to an older heritage. For the past seven years, Saraswati Nakhua and some of her friends have been drinking pearls dissolved in vinegar every morning — "like Cleopatra of ancient Egypt" — as a way of regenerating their bodies.

Vijaya Venkat, whose philosophies transcend such a piecemeal approach to nutrition — she runs the Health Awareness Centre, which is dedicated to offering a comprehensive world-view connecting "food, health, ecology, employment and women's role" — talks volubly of returning to "the methods of the ancients", which modern society has neglected. Similarly, Anwar Ali Khan, creative director of an advertising agency, argues that the modern definition of health and disease has become skewed: "In ancient China, you would pay doctors to keep you well, and you'd stop paying them if ever you fell ill." So, for him, his daily bread — or rather, his daily *dal*, since his diet denies him bread — is the proverbial ounce of prevention.

Khan's diet denies him many things, including beer, wine, apples and oranges. "So I discovered that there are two types of hunger," he explained. "Subsistence hunger and gratification hunger. Since I can eat as much as I want, I don't experience subsistence hunger, but I've come to know the latter very well." Experiencing a craving which he ignores gives him, he freely admits, a sense of moral superiority. "There's a moral elegance about being on a diet." His attitude is not unlike that of ancient Greece, where the regimen encouraged health of character as well as of body by defying the tyranny of the tastebuds! This must explain why no one, in all the concern for ancient practices, has gone back to ancient Rome or Epicurean times. Gluttony is neither elegant nor moral.

Jehangir Palkhivala, one of Venkat's most ardent disciples, pointed out that people have to change some of their most basic assumptions about food. "The last time I ate chicken, I thought, 'Well, I'm eating it because I like it' — but then I thought, 'What is liking?' It's nothing but habit, and putrefying flesh should have no place in my intestines." Or, as Venkat avowed, "Food prepared



Anwar Ali Khan beginning his three-course meal of coconut water, lime juice and sugarcane juice



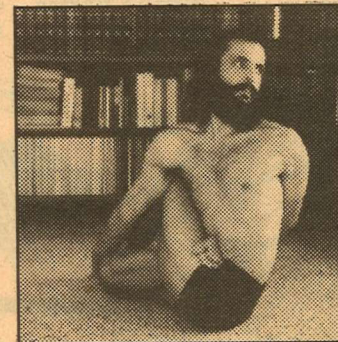
Anjali Mukerjee: away from the pizza-pasta culture

without hurting Mother Earth will not hurt you." On the other hand, dietitian Anjali Mukerjee, whose scientific approach to food is also flourishing in this newly conscious era, refuses to let moral considerations play any part in her prescriptions. While Venkat and Palkhivala comfortably advocate a holistic view of nutrition that is universally applicable, Mukerjee is interested only in diet, which she tailors to suit the individual. So, for that matter, does Khan's doctor, the Kerala-based Manik Hirananda-

Michael Rodrigues

Agreed Palkhivala: "You don't have to think, you just have to be open enough for your body to change. I used to love mashed potato, but now, if I have just a couple of spoonfuls, I start feeling sick."

Palkhivala, when he opened the door of his home to be interviewed, had just made a batch of *idlis* without grain or fermentation. They were made of sprouts, and, though green to look at, they were surprisingly light and frothy. "Fermentation should take place within the body, rather than artificially outside it. And grain is the pits, it actually creates disease." Palkhivala has developed a verbal shorthand to accompany his lifestyle — it is disorienting to hear him talk about "trying to avoid cooked; I can be comfortably raw



Jehangir Palkhivala: comfortably raw

for weeks at a time".

Palkhivala is so committed to his beliefs that he has few qualms about altering social norms to accommodate them. So, although he did not attempt to argue with the assertion that much social contact is dependent on food, he added tranquilly: "Frankly, I would like to have less contact with people than I do — I want to spend more time with just the wife and kids." Khan, on the other hand, is all too alive to the social sacrifices involved. "Being on a diet makes you an extremely unsociable person," he complained. "So many personal transactions are done over food. Which means that either you don't meet people for a month, or you sit around drinking lime juice." Mukerjee's methods, however, offer a practical solution to the dilemma: "You can go to a restaurant and order spaghetti. All you have to do is ask for the pasta, sauce and cheese to be served separately." She believes that in the social world of eating, you can have your cake and eat it too.

Palkhivala realises that as his son and daughter get to a school-

going age, they will be under enormous pressure to conform with their peers' eating habits. "We would never refuse our children anything," he insisted. "If my daughter sees chocolate, we try to distract her, but if that doesn't work, we let her have a little." He acknowledges the need to adapt a little in order to achieve a slight compromise between that indefinable thing called "liking" and the desire to be healthy. So, in the Palkhivala household, ice-cream is made by peeling bananas, freezing them, and tossing them into a dry grinder for a few seconds. Or strawberries are sometimes served with a "cream" made by blending cashewnuts and apple juice. But Palkhivala is not happy with the idea of compromise as a long-term solution. "We love this stuff, so we'd like to make it in healthy ways, but only until we stop craving it altogether."

But for Venkat, adapting traditional cuisine is an integral part of her philosophy of going back to the ancient ways. She concocts a *kulfi* entirely out of fruit pulp, for example. "Most of the dishes I make are traditional dishes," she said. "But the ingredients and method of preparing are different." In her own way, Mukerjee, too, is a cultural purist. "We need to pull people out of the pizza-pasta culture," she declared vehemently. "The basic Indian diet is very healthy, but it's the addition of over-processed things from Western culture, like refined flour and oil, which make it unhealthy."

Khan, however, baulks a little at discussing the philosophy behind his dietary practices. "I have always considered people on a diet to be faddists — they talk about their bowel movements in detail! I still feel that way, I hate to be seen as 'that kind of person.'" And indeed, it is hard for most of us to identify ourselves as "that kind of person", to adopt all the lifestyle changes that accompany many of the new philosophies of food.

There are exceptions, like one of Venkat's recent converts, Maryann Gandikota. She was recently diagnosed with terminal cancer, and was given 13 months to live. She became involved with Venkat less than a week ago, reacting against the invasive medicine which was treating her like lots of little parts. "They wanted to remove some of my organs as though they were my enemies." For her, the holistic views of Venkat are a gratifying change. "I know what radiation has done to my lymphatic nodes, my immune system, my blood. And if she has an answer, I'm willing to take it."

But not all of us want to devote our lives to a system. For those who do not want to alter their entire world-view along with their diet, Venkat's health food *dabbas* are probably not the ideal option: "The portions were tiny, and it didn't taste very good," criticised one woman who had briefly tried it. In a culture where our lives are organised around food, it's only the brave, the few and the privileged who can afford to reshape a relationship we take for granted. ■