

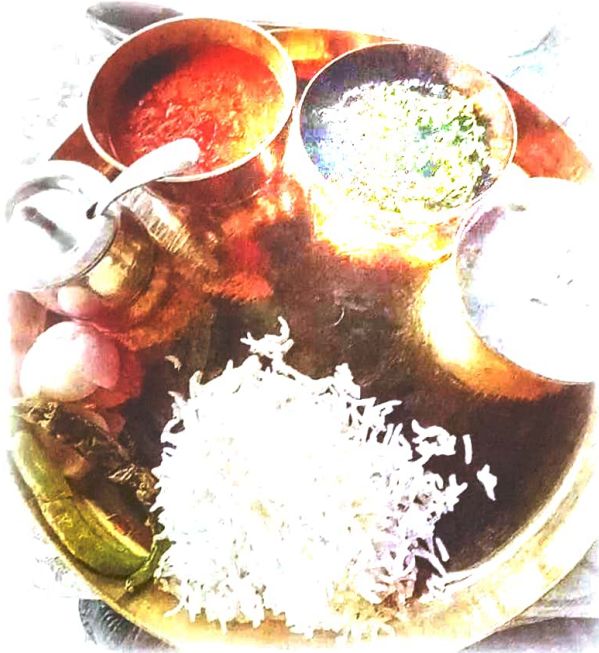
A plate full of happiness

Nutritionist Rujuta Diwekar shares her wellness philosophy with Upala Sen



There is something about Rujuta Diwekar's posts. Even when my social media handle is on mute, I stop at the visuals of food and read the accompanying text. A relatively recent one is a picture of what looks like a square *narkeler naru*. The caption reads: "Narali Poornima is the celebration of the sibling bond of economy & ecology. Where the coconut from the land is offered to the choppy sea waters before fishing resumes. Because the land and sea must coexist to thrive (sic)..." There is another rather chatty post that goes, "I used to run a small gym in Ruia College from 2005-2009. A friend of mine who's a mobility expert told me that gyms prosper when urban planning fails. When open spaces, walkable roads shrink, 'fitness culture' expands because then fitness becomes currency of the rich."

Diwekar, who is based in Mumbai, goes by the descriptors "public health advocate" and nutritionist. But she doesn't talk diets, no keto-sheto if you know what I mean. She seems adept at some kind of wellness-tongue, which is a mix of eating tips, observations and her takes on life. She disses many a thing as "phaltu", tells you to combat the "sagging face" and the "toxic boyfriend" with the right atti-



tude. And, she listens.

In one video she talks — in Mumbaiya Hindi — about how a man called her up to say "Madam kya karneka weight loss ke baare me". He had cut out all rice from his diet and for the last three days was living on three cups of black coffee right through the day. Diwekar's first point of interjection, "Boss, tum karta kya hai."

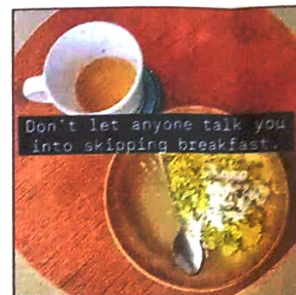
She tells me over a phone interview, "It is difficult to separate the act of eating and food itself from our way of living." And that is how she proceeds to tell the on field salesperson that a rice-less diet will not give him enough energy, roti from special flour will inflate his budget and increase his wife's workload, make him constipated and consequently irritable.

Diwekar says, "I think food

is not just routine carbohydrate, fat and calories, but something that gives us a sense of belonging, helps us unwind and connect with people." She continues, "We use food to celebrate, to get over grief, it even allows us sometimes to make political points."

The semiotics of her response is refreshing, shorn as it is of expert jargon and airs. There she is day after day on her social media handle, hair pulled back, spectacles and confident hand gestures in place, delivering her take. Sometimes she too makes a political point but doesn't mix it with food so there is no odd aftertaste.

Did she start out this way, I ask the woman who is famed for being among other things Kareena Kapoor's diet guide. Her reply: "I have not made a conscious effort



to be philosophical about food. I think it comes from working long years and learning on the job."

Speaking of her work, she straddles many social orbits. There are the rich and famous who consult her, the regular urban Indian and the Sonave village community. The last mentioned is her ancestral village close to Mumbai; she runs a farming project here. Can there be a food philosophy common to such a socio-economically and culturally diverse set?

Diwekar says, "We may think that people with more money and better access to kitchen staff need to eat something more exotic. But that is not how it works. Some of my clients come from streams such as Bollywood, they are very popular and people want to know

about their lives. But at the end of the day, they are regular people who want to enjoy their life and feel happy and be healthy."

So is she saying that the food principle guiding the on field salesperson and the Bollywood A-lister is the same? Diwekar says, "Any diet works if you're able to comply with it. It is not something that you do for the next few months till you lose weight. It is something that you need to be able to do for the next 20 to 30 years, which means it cannot take away from your time and from your money."

In her free time, Diwekar likes to travel. "Especially to the Himalayas," she tells me. Is her nutritionist's radar up even when she is vacationing? She says, "I am always excited to learn about a food ritual or tradition. Recently, I was in Manali and I was walking around with my guide, and he pointed out to me the *lingdi*, which is a wild uncultivated vegetable. In June, when it is fresh, the locals make a pickle out of it." She goes on, "The guide pointed out another vegetable called *shosh*. It grows right by small streams, which also make a sound that goes *shosh*."

She talks about how *makhana* too was a regional food till mainstream media learnt about Kareena Kapoor making it part of her diet ahead of her *Chhama Challo* number in 2010. Lo and behold it became a superfood! Says Diwekar, "People are now making *makhana* pasta, Emirates is serving *makkana* in the business class lounge. But what I have seen is that not everyone does well with *makhana*, which is just to prove that not all good things are good for everyone. It is all about how it sits with the rest of you." Touché.

ALL PHOTOS FROM DIWEKAR'S X HANDLE