

# The Indian film about beef that turned controversial

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Image copyright - Special Arrangement

Image caption - The film was made by the group of five students of Tata Institute of Social Sciences

**A documentary on beef eating habits in India was withdrawn from a recent film festival in Delhi. But was the film really about beef eating? The BBC's Vikas Pandey speaks to the students who made the film.**

Reetika Revathy Subramanian says she is still in "shock" because of the "completely avoidable" controversy over the film.

The film, *Caste on the Menu Card*, was the only film among the 35 sent to India's information and broadcasting ministry to be refused clearance for "technical" reasons last week.

Ms Subramanian says the documentary "became the victim of the current atmosphere of intolerance".

"What hurts the most is that people formed opinions without even watching the film. It is not about beef eating, it looks at deeper issues of India's caste system and food habits related with it," she says.

She adds that "we have mentioned beef several times in the film to explore caste-related food habits".



Image copyright - Caste on the Menu Card

Image caption - The film was made between August and October last year

Beef is a sensitive issue these days and has been in the news in the past few months. Several state governments have officially banned the sale and consumption of beef.

In last September, a man was lynched by a mob over rumours that he had been consuming beef. Similar cases have been reported in other parts of the country.

The slaughter of cows is a sensitive issue in India as the animal is considered sacred by Hindus, who comprise 80% of the country's 1.2bn people.

But activists say food choices should be a matter of an individual's choice.

Several writers and filmmakers have returned their national awards over what they see as growing intolerance in India.

They also accuse Prime Minister Narendra Modi for not speaking decisively against such acts.

Ms Subramanian supports the stand taken by the writers and filmmakers.

"I fully support their stand. Intolerance and curbs on free speech have reached our colleges and universities and that worries me the most," she says.

## 'Old film'

Her co-filmmaker Vaseem Chaudhary says that most people know the film was shot last year between August and July.

"We shot the film much before beef became an issue of debate on national TV channels. We did not make the film because of the current controversies over beef consumption," he says.

He too agrees that educational institutions should have a free environment for discussions on any issue.

"Banning our film [from the film festival] was not a step in the right discussion. We don't take any side, we just want to have an open debate about the issue," he says.



Image copyright - Caste on the Menu Card

Image caption - The documentary explores the relation between India's caste system and food habits

Ms Subramanian adds that open debates are very important for India's future and "students should always be heard even if you disagree with them".

"The idea of the film came to us because we had an open debate about beef consumption in our college, Tata Institute of Social Sciences. We were allowed to screen the film in several places this year until it was blocked at the Delhi film festival," she says.

Both filmmakers urge the student community to work together to ensure films like Caste on the Menu Card are allowed to be screened freely in any part of the country.

"Otherwise the message gets lost in the din. We wanted to talk about caste and food, but discussions around the film were limited to beef," she says.