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# Why is the I&B Ministry so scared of this beef documentary?

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When a bunch of young filmmakers from Tata Institute of Social Sciences set out to explore the economy and history of beef eating in Mumbai through a film, they had no idea that their project would fall victim to the current political discourse of the country.

Atul Anand, Ananyaa Gaur, Anurup Khillare, Reetika Revathy Subramanian, Vaseem Chaudhary - students of School of Media and Cultural Studies, TISS, Mumbai made the documentary *Caste on the Menu Card* in 2014 as part of their coursework. The film was screened for the first time on 5 January, 2015 in the TISS campus.

This was much before 50 year-old Akhlaq was lynched in Dadri over rumours of eating beef. This was also much before 56 eminent personalities returned their Sahitya Akademi, Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan and national awards condemning the incident and the increasing attack on freedom of speech.

But today on the eve of the screening of their film at a film festival in the national capital, they find themselves on the same pedestal. Fighting for the same cause.

*Caste on the Menu Card* was among the 19 films under the competitive section chosen for screening at the Jeevika Asia Livelihood Documentary Film Festival. However, just a day before the film festival started the filmmakers got to know that the Information and Broadcasting hasn't given their film an exemption permission which is necessary for public screening.

## What are I&B Ministry's reservations?

*Catch* spoke to Amit Chandra, Associate Director Centre For Civil Society, the organisers of the film festival to understand on what grounds the film wasn't given a clearance. Chandra says: "The Ministry didn't give any particular reason per se. We sent a list of 35 films, 19

competitive, rest in the non-competitive category on October 4. We got clearance for 34 films. For *Caste on the Menu Card* we were told that it doesn't fit the contemporary discourse on beef."

However, Chandra emphasises on the fact that they have encountered such a problem for the first time. "This has never happened before. The festival is in its 12th year. Hundreds of films has been cleared by the Ministry. In fact, till now it was just a formality."

What is strange is the fact that the Ministry decided to drop the screening of the film based on the title, duration, names of the film-maker and a brief synopsis. For these are the only details that are sent to the Ministry to seek clearance for the films.

*The Indian Express* quoted K Sanjay Murthy, Joint Secretary (Films), as saying: "We have not given exemption from certification to this documentary since we were not provided with adequate information about the film by the festival organisers."

The organisers are still pursuing the issue and have requested the Ministry to not decide the fate of the film based on the synopsis and watch it before taking a final decision. However, CSS is not very hopeful and has decided to go ahead with the film festival. Pushing too hard could affect the screening of the other 34 films, the organisers feel. "We can't afford to get in a confrontationist mode", said Chandra.

### What does the synopsis of the film say?

The synopsis of the film reads as follows:

"Caste on The Menu Card" (2015) delves into the idea of food as a site of exclusion by focusing on beef-eating practices in Mumbai. It attempts to portray the prevalence of caste differentiations as seen in the food choices of people in the city and touches upon concerns related to livelihood, social inclusion and human rights.

By tracing the mythological and historical roots of the meat-eating culture in our country, the film discusses the hierarchy maintained by Brahminical preferences and its intended subversions. This is seen in the stand taken on dealing with the political economy of the leather and meat industries. The film also follows the ruptured background of universities' caste politics over the demand of inclusion of beef in institutions. It observes that many restaurants in Mumbai offer beef delicacies, but off the menu. Thus, the film reads 'Caste on the Menu Card'.

### What are the filmmakers doing about it?

The students have expressed shock over the incident. In a statement they said: "We are deeply upset about the turn of events. We are planning to get the film screened on college campuses and civil society organizations across the country to encourage a dialogue. Moreover, we will be releasing the film online in the days ahead."