

# A film axed

BY DIVYA TRIVEDI



**A documentary film on the beef-eating practices in Mumbai is denied permission for screening in what is seen an extension of the saffron agenda to censor divergent cultural expressions. By DIVYA TRIVEDI**

The media, especially the mass media, seem to run risks mentioning or writing about beef. In Haryana, a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-ruled State, the editor of the government bilingual magazine *Shiksha Bharti* was removed for printing an article based on a scientific report which said that beef and veal helped absorption of iron in the body. In Maharashtra, another BJP-ruled State, a film that sought to discuss the beef-eating practices in Mumbai was axed on October 29, a day before it was to be screened at the Jeevika Asia Livelihood Documentary Film Festival. The festival, organised by the Centre for Civil Society, screened 34 films.

*Caste on the Menu Card*, the documentary film by Ananyaa Gaur, Anurup Khillare, Atul Anand, Reetika Revathy Subramanian and Vaseem Chaudhary from the School of Media and Cultural Studies of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, was made as part of the “Castemopolitan Mumbai” series in 2014, before the beef ban was enforced by the State government. The government denied the film an exemption certificate on the grounds that it dealt with the contentious issue of beef. The film-makers said: “We were informed by the festival organiser, Manoj Mathew, that our documentary film cannot be screened because the Joint Secretary of the Films Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, has denied permission for the same. Mathew further said that the Ministry had denied the film permission after it found the mention of beef in the synopsis of the film.”

The film shows that many restaurants in Mumbai offer beef delicacies, but off the menu. It delves into the idea of food as a site of exclusion by focussing on the beef-eating practices in Mumbai. The synopsis of the film says it attempts to portray the prevalence of caste differentiations as seen in the food choices of people in the city and touches upon the concerns relating to livelihood, social inclusion and human rights. Atul says the controversy in 2014 surrounding the removal of induction plates provided in the common area of the TISS campus over concerns that students might cook beef and pork and the subsequent debates that engulfed the campus provided the idea for the film. In a scene capturing the debate on the campus, the film shows a student from the north-eastern region question the notion of staple food. "When I came here for the first time, I got a culture shock when I had to eat paneer and roti," he says, implying that staple diet varies from region to region and its denial to some communities is a violation of human rights as enshrined in the Constitution.

The film presents different perspectives on the merits and demerits of beef-eating, with even a cow therapist weighing in to give his views. But the objective presentation and the finer points of the film hardly seem to be the censor's concern. The fact is that it disturbs the homogenised cultural narrative of the communal forces by authentically showing how different kinds of meats are the staple food of the masses and how they are prepared and served on the streets of Mumbai. Hence, it has become a thorny issue for the censor.

More importantly, the film manages to point to the inextricable link between one's caste and livelihood issues that persists in India. In the film, Professor Ramaiah of the TISS raises an important question pertaining to the leather industry: who is processing and producing the goods, who is reaping the profits, and why is the industry divided along caste lines? Just as eating forbidden foods was first imposed (meat of dead animals, for instance) on certain castes and then became one of the reasons for treating them as outcasts, certain unclean and unhygienic professions were first relegated to some caste groups as their Manu-divined duty and later used to outcaste the same groups.

Chattarkaris in Odisha, and Silpkars and Doms in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand are examples of people who were treated as outcastes because they consumed forbidden foods, says B.B. Kumar in his book *India: Caste, Culture & Traditions*. The concept of purity and pollution in Hinduism stems from this. It is deeply entrenched in the caste system and plays out in daily life through endogamy in marriages, work and cuisine. The plate of food is not innocent but a major site of discrimination and one's caste decides what one can and cannot eat. To give an example, several communities eat rats, but Musahars of Bihar, who help farmers by catching rats that can harm the crop, are branded as rat-eaters.

Seen in this context, the ban on the documentary film is as much an extension of the saffron agenda to censor divergent cultural expressions in books and films as it is to obfuscate the caste practices that challenge the Hindu-upper caste-centric notion of the Indian nation state. The film poses a challenge to the depiction of the Hindu upper-caste vegetarian model as universal, blacking out the food practices of entire communities. This narrative also completely ignores the fact that several Hindu saints, such as Agastya, as told in the epic Mahabharata, consumed meat. King Shalya mentions in the Mahabharata that the saint Saraswat ate fish during 12 years of famine to stay alive. According to *Manu Smriti*, the sage Vishwamitra wanted to eat the meat of a dog belonging to a Chandala, an outcaste. By tracing the

mythological and historical roots of the meat-eating culture, the film discusses the hierarchy maintained by Brahminical preferences and its intended subversions.

Chandraiah Gopani, Assistant Professor in the GB Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad, welcomed the opening up of the debate within the media and civil society. He pointed out that academic institutions such as the University of Hyderabad, Osmania University and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) had been engaged in this debate for years. “Earlier, nobody used to talk about these things. But now, as the secular space is being shaken by fascist forces, they are being raised by everybody, which is a welcome sign,” he said. Cautioning against reducing the debate to one of “personal choice”, he said it was important to reevoke the negatively projected and legitimised symbols of beef or Ravana in order to defeat the fascist forces. “The question is not whether one eats or does not eat beef. It is about the principle to defeat the right to eat what we want to eat,” he said.

However, the ban on the film had the opposite effect, with several invitations from across the country to the film-makers to screen the film in their cities. The film-makers YouTubed the film; it attracted more than 40,000 views in four days. The Birsa Ambedkar Phule Students Association (BAPSA) of JNU organised a screening on Sabarmati dhaba lawns, but the administration cancelled the show in the last minute. In a show of unity, close to 500 students came together to help with the screening of the film. Students affiliated to the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) tried to disrupt the screening by raising a ruckus but were pushed back by progressive elements. The GS4 security guards pushed and shoved the students and tried to stop the proceedings, but the students formed a human chain to ensure that the screening went on uninterrupted. At the end of the screening, the students, led by Manikanta Bahujan, sang the “Beef Anthem” and took out a victory march to the Ganga dhaba.

“This is a victory of the progressive students community against the fascist onslaught of Brahminical Manuvadi forces inside the campus. However, this is a fact that the repression is more, therefore the struggle and the unity of the oppressed has to be more. It is the need of the hour for the oppressed to be united and fight against the common enemies. BAPSA congratulates the socially oppressed [Dalit-Muslim-Adivasi and backward] students in particular and all students in general on their huge solidarity against the ABVP and the JNU administration. BAPSA also thanks the JNUSU and other left democratic organisations for their active support in making the programme successful,” said Chinmaya Mahanand, BAPSA president.

Gopani called it a moral victory for the progressive forces and said it showed that it was a contest and a struggle for the basic right to food. He said this intolerance towards Dalit-Bahujans was prevalent under the Congress regime, too, but in a normal way. “Under the BJP, it has taken extreme forms. The BJP has been trying to impose hegemonic practices,” he said.

As a direct result of the resilience shown by the JNU students in safeguarding the freedom of expression, *Panchajanya*, the mouthpiece of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), in its cover story dated November 8, called JNU the citadel of disintegration. “Whether to express sympathy for the hanging of Yakub Memon and Afzal Guru or pray to Mahishasur during Durga Puja, the last stronghold of the Communists, this school creates and multiplies social fissures,” it said on the cover. It went on to describe the institution as a support base for anti-national activities despite receiving funds from the Centre. “In 2010, when naxalites in Dantewada,

Chhattisgarh, killed 75 paramilitary personnel, the pro-naxalite students' unions of the university celebrated openly and hailed the act. And all this happened under the nose of the JNU administration," the article said.

Another article in the magazine alleged that the "JNU is one such institution where nationalism is considered an offence. Presenting Indian culture in a distorted way is common. The removal of Army from Kashmir is supported here. They advocate various other anti-national activities here."

JNU Vice-Chancellor Sudhir Kumar Sopory dismissed the allegations as "totally baseless" and emphasised the academic excellence of the university, its culture of coexistence of students from different faiths and, above all, the role of JNU students in national development.

"Several ex-students of the university are Members of Parliament. Many of our students are part of the bureaucracy. India's Foreign Secretary is a former JNU student. Also in the intelligence agencies, there are quite a few JNUites," he said.

He recalled the role of JNU students and faculty members in fighting the Emergency. "They have made great contributions in the fields of education, in overall policymaking and in the growth and development of the country. That is why I feel that the role of JNU should not be diminished by these kinds of statements."

Congress leader Manish Tewari said JNU should sue the magazine for defamation. "After all, the ABVP is also active in JNU. Does *Panchajanya* want to say that students affiliated to the ABVP are also a part of the terminology they have used?"

Brinda Karat, Polit Bureau member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), rubbished the allegations. She said: "What *Panchajanya* says can only be taken as a badge of honour for the JNU as it shows the institution of learning must be doing something right when anti-national magazine like *Panchajanya* speaks about them in an absurd, ridiculous and derogatory language."

Pratim, Gargi and Lenin, students of JNU, responded to the RSS' allegations in the online forum Kafila: "If, according to the RSS, nationalism means throwing of ink, killing minorities, manufacturing riots, throwing all dissenters to Pakistan, cutting funds in education and changing the Constitution of this country, we are sorry but we do not share your idea of nationalism....Time and again the RSS and its affiliates have tried to cast aspersions on JNU and even claimed of bombing it, as Ashok Singhal had once said; but we stand tall with our head held high as does the rest of the country that stand by its democratic and secular ethos."