

TISS DOCUMENTARY ON BEEF BAN BLOCKED BY FILMS DIVISION

By Sadaf Modak & Ankita Bhatkhande, Mumbai Mirror | Oct 30, 2015, 03.00 AM IST



Centre has no appetite for meat debate

Govt body asks festival organisers to drop 'Caste On The Menu Card', says it's 'too risky'.

The Films Division of India has scrapped the screening of a film by TISS students on the controversial beef ban and the restrictions often imposed on non-vegetarians, calling it too "risky" in the charged atmosphere prevailing in the country.

The documentary film *Caste on the Menu Card* was one of the 35 to be screened at the 12th Jeevika: Asia Livelihood Documentary Festival 2015 on Saturday, but word came from the Films Division on Wednesday that it was clearing only 34 films and the organisers will have to drop the TISS entry.

The film, which delves into the idea of food as a site of exclusion by focusing on beef-eating practices in Mumbai, also refers to a protest in August last year by Dalit students in TISS demanding that beef and pork be introduced in the institution's canteen.

The demand had sparked a sharp divide in the institute, with Dalit students saying it was 'Brahminical' on the part of the institute to deny them the right to consume food items of their choice.

In March this year, possession and consumption of beef was banned in Maharashtra. Restaurants were forced to take beef off their menus and offenders face up to five years in prison. A few weeks later, Haryana too passed a similar law.

Defending the decision to disallow the film's screening, K Sanjay Murthy, joint secretary (films), Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, said: "The organisers made the applications very late. As a result of which, there was lack of information about a film dealing with a topic like this. There are some protocols which we have to follow only after which clearances can be given. It is a one-off case where certain doubts have to be cleared before giving a go-ahead."

The organisers, however, said they had sent all 35 documentaries for clearance to the Films

Division earlier this month. Festival representatives said that they did not receive any response from the Films Division till Wednesday. "The order came on Wednesday afternoon. When we inquired, we were informed that a decision was taken to not allow the screening of the TISS entry. We were told orally that the film was not cleared since it touches upon the beef ban and with all the controversies surrounding the issue, they did not want to take any chances," festival director Manoj Matthew said.

Matthew said the clearance was refused only on the basis of a brief synopsis sent to them by the students. He added that the organisers' request that Films Division officials see the film before taking a call was denied. A panel discussion on the documentary was also cancelled.

Anjali Monteiro and K P Jayasankar, professors at the School of Media and Cultural Studies at TISS, said the ban on the screening of 'Caste on the Menu Card' is in keeping with the larger agenda of intolerance that one sees at work in the public sphere today. "Needless to say, these attempts to regulate speech, food habits and behaviour in the name of 'Indian' culture are a threat to democracy. As citizens, we must resist such cultural policing and projects of censorship," said an email sent by the professors.

A student, who was involved in the making of the film, said the issues raised in the documentary should be open for public discussion. "Banning the documentary does not serve any purpose," he said.

"We had made the film in August-September 2014 when beef was not banned in the state. It was triggered by a discussion around campuses across the country, including ours, on the inclusion of beef and pork in canteen menus. The film does not only talk about food, but extends to speaking on livelihoods dependent on the demand for the food cutting across religions but deeply embedded within caste," he added.

The film was screened at TISS in January this year as a part of the student film festival called Cut.In. It was one of the six films made on the theme of caste by Masters students of Media and Cultural Studies at TISS.