

A ground report from the protest screening of *Caste on the Menu Card*

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Neetole Mitra | Nov 5, 2015



On the night of November 1, 2015 at around 9:30 pm, hundreds were stomping in the dusty grounds outside Sabarmati hostel, Jawaharlal Nehru University. In the partially-lit vicinity people joined hands to create a protective circle around the screen and the screening equipment. The crowd, increasing in number as minutes passed by, shouted slogans against those trying to break them up from the other side.

On the other side, JNU security guards tried to reason with the students as much as the students tried to reason with them both sides pushing into each other raising a dust storm and breaking into sudden outbursts of violence.

When the students decided to screen the censor's latest victim: Tata Institute of Social Sciences–produced *Caste on the Menu Card*, the administration didn't have a problem. It was as it had always been in the campus – students raising a voice against undemocratic forces with the help of the Institute. But this time, the permission was retraced hours before the scheduled time of the screening. The admin had suddenly turned against the students.

Those who had gathered for the protest screening spoke about how there was an order from somewhere “high up” because of which the situation had turned so chaotic. There were voices from the back of the crowd shouting, “*JNU mein nahi hoga toh kaha hoga? Kahi nahi hoga!*”

The film is available online so most of the people present were there to support the cause and protest against this sudden conservative stance of the Institute. “*Caste on the Menu Card* pertinently pointed out how dominant communities have begun to dictate food practices in small but sure ways. However, the film was very basic in its argument and though well researched, could not sufficiently bring out the complexities in the politics of food in India,” says Parvathi Ramanathan, a PhD Scholar in the School of Arts and Aesthetics.

Ajith Cherian of the School of Languages adds, “This is simply BJP trying to put a veil on its actual purpose. While everyone stays focused on beef no one is going to talk about the other things the centre is doing. 70 per cent of this crowd would have been at ITO adding force to the UGC protest had this screening not been happening.”

It is this sentiment that rung out loud and clear in all that was said and done during that evening. Almost all who were involved went about the matter quite meticulously. The students knew they had to protest even though most of them had already seen the film. The guards knew there’s no point stopping the students but they were duty-bound. Some even gave up and stood at the back talking to other students.

Dissent was the need of the moment and that’s what the protest screening celebrated on that day. Students clapped and cheered as an appetising beef patty bubbled in hot oil. But what was disconcerting is the thought of the 3 PCR vans manning the JNU entrance, almost waiting with bated breath for something to actually go wrong.

Just a day after the student protest, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh mouthpiece, Panchjanya, published an article written by an ex-student calling JNU a hub of “anti-National”, “naxalite” and “anti-Hindu” activity.

This drew strong reactions from the staff and students of the institute. “Anyone promoting values that uphold the rights and dignity of ordinary citizens is labelled Naxalite. We are proud that in

JNU we are creating students who are concerned about the state of the country and trying to build a more tolerant, inclusive, democratic society,” says Jayati Ghosh, Economics professor. “RSS believes in an India that is for a particular kind of Hindu, not even for the ordinary, believing-often meat-eating-Hindu who wants to live in peace with other communities. The Hindus it mobilises are bigoted and hate-filled. We stand against that, so naturally they think of us as ‘anti-national,’” explains Nivedita Menon, professor of Political Science.

Links to embedded videos:

<https://youtu.be/HEk1kPLnhyA>

<https://youtu.be/EOI4CaJitmE>