

Caste On The Menu Card

Filmmakers: Ananyaa Gaur, Anurup Khilare, Atul Anand, Reetika Revathy Subramanian, Vaseem Chaudary

Director's Note

In June 2014, students in our college Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai came to know that induction plates from the hostels had been removed. The reason behind this action was alleged to be the students using those induction plates to cook beef and pork. The official reason given by the college administration was rise in the electricity bill. It led to a demand for inclusion of beef and pork in the college dining hall menu. We got the idea for our film from this incident. However, our film explores the idea of food as a site of exclusion not just in the campus but also in the urban spaces of Mumbai.

It was quite difficult but a learning experience for us to make a documentary on the central theme of caste. The class of 2013-15 at School of Media and Cultural Studies finalised the 'Castemopolitan Mumbai' theme after rounds of discussions and it was not an easy process. Caste has been an invisible elephant in the room, which people, especially the privileged castes would not want to address. It reflects in our curriculum too where scholarly texts on caste are not included in the syllabus. Discussions on issues such as Hindutva, nationalism, gender, etc in classrooms would happen without going into the intricacies of how caste plays an important role there. It is not the case that there aren't enough scholarly works on caste. The exclusion of scholarly works by the 'subaltern' writers from the syllabus is systemic. This structural silence on caste made it very difficult for us to make this documentary. We would find it difficult to understand the idea of caste privilege or how vegetarianism is not just an innocent 'choice' of the privileged castes.

The discussion on caste offends the privileged section of our society. The privileged and ruling class of this country prefers the communal discourse on beef which pits Muslims against Hindus. Our film shows how food is deeply linked with caste. It debunks fallacy of the idea of the Viraat Hindu and shows how the Hindus are not a homogenised category but a construct. This construct works through the silence on caste which purposefully invisibilizes its link to almost every issue in India. There are Dalits, people from backward castes and even Brahmins in Kerala who eat beef. It is their staple diet. Ambedkar says, "To my mind, it was strategy which made the Brahmins give up beef-eating and start worshipping the cow. The clue to this worship of the cow is to be found in the struggle between Buddhism and Brahmanism and the means adopted by Brahmanism to establish its supremacy over Buddhism. The strife between Buddhism and Brahmanism is a crucial fact in Indian history. Without the realisation of this fact, it is impossible to explain some of the features of Hinduism."

Vijay Chindaliya, one of the characters in our documentary, works as a fourth-grade employee at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai which is not a coincidence. We have highlighted in our film how Brahminical caste system affects our food choices and livelihood options. Vijay stands out in the film, especially because of his strong articulations on the privileged upper caste hypocrisy on meat. Often when people start out to do some work on caste, they end up portraying caste as a Dalit problem. It was very important for our film to not fall into that trap. We show in our documentary that caste is about the Brahmins, the upper castes and the middle castes too.

There was an interesting incidence when we tried to get permission from the Student's Union of TISS in August 2014 to shoot and use the footage of the general body meeting on the campus. The general body meeting was going to discuss the issue of inclusion of beef and

pork in the college dining hall menu. The TISS Student's Union wasn't in the favor to allow us to shoot. It was in the last minute when the President of the Union tried to play smart by asking us to get permission from the students who were present at the meeting. It actually worked in our favor and we got permission from the general body. We have documented that part in our film.

It wasn't easy to get interviewees to share their views, given the topic of our film. However, it was easier to shoot outside the campus. In August 2014, the Director of TISS, Mumbai had written a threatening email to the student community of TISS, following the demand for the inclusion of beef and pork in the college dining hall menu. That email ended the discussions on beef and pork on the campus. The students and faculty on the campus were not ready to talk to us for the documentary. There are few interviews in the documentary which we actually shot before that threatening email from the Director.

Our film is a 'dangerous' film because it brings the caste perspective and debunks the communal agenda on beef. This might be one of the reasons why the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting denied the permission for our film's screening at the 12th Jeevika Documentary Festival's venue in New Delhi in October 2015. Our faculty members at School of Media and Cultural Studies, TISS Mumbai have been supportive since the beginning, especially when the film was denied permission for screening in the documentary festival. We had done a little self-censorship on our part, to avoid any controversy or a difficult situation for our faculty such as we didn't use the parts of Ashwini Mishra's rap song where he criticizes TISS.