'Padmavati' Controversy - The Past and the Present

Why in news?

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Protests have broken out across the country for alleged erroneous depiction of Rajput queen Rani Padmavati in the upcoming movie 'Padmavati'.

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Who is Padmavati?

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- **Poetry** - The earliest source to mention her is "Padmavat", an epic fictionalized poem written in 1540 CE.
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- It was written by Malik Muhammad Jayasi, a Sufi poet and a resident of Jayas in Awadh, a very long way from Chittor, Rajasthan.
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- The story with elements of fantasy portrays her as an exceptionally beautiful princess of the Singhal kingdom (Sri Lanka).
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- Ratan Sen, the Rajput ruler of Chittor, who heard about her beauty went on an adventurous quest, won her hand in marriage and brought her to Chittor.
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- Following this, Alauddin Khalji, the Sultan of Delhi who heard about her beauty laid siege to Chittor to obtain her.
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- Many events occurred during the period of the siege including the killing of Ratan Sen, till the Fort was finally captured by Khalji.
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- But before the capture, Padmavati and her companions committed Jauhar (self-immolation) to protect their honour.
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- After her sacrifice, the Rajput men died fighting on the battlefield.
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- **History** - According to the poem, Padmavati was born in 1540 which is 224 years after Khalji’s death as per historical records.
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- Khalji defeated the Rana of Chittor in 1303 and died in 1316, but no one by the name Padmini or Padmavati existed then.
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- There are just only two historical facts relevant to the story - i) Khalji's attack on Chittor, ii) Ratan Sen's defeat.
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- **Oral tradition** - Besides the verifiable historical facts, there are other facts, culturally constructed through the oral tradition of telling and retelling stories.
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- For the common people who are untrained to distinguish historical facts from cultural and popular memory, this acquires the status of history.
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- Evidently, this popular memory is subject to quick metamorphoses just as the Padmavati story.
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- The story has travelled place and time from North India and Rajasthan to Bengal from the 16th to the 20th century and has undergone several mutations.
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What is the controversy?

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- There are arguments that there were differentiation between historical facts and the popular versions of the story as depicted in the film Padmavati.
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- **Khalji** - Sultan Alauddin Khalji had earned a reputation among contemporary and modern historians for several achievements.
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- These include-
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i. successful thwarting of Mongol invasions of India
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ii. conquest of large territories
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iii. strictly enforcing low prices of commodities in the markets for the common people's daily purchases
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iv. declared defiance of the Shariat in matters of governance, etc
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- But Khalji was certainly not known for his lustful pursuit of women.
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- The movie revolving around Khalji's conquest of Chittor for Padmavati undermines the respect for the ruler.
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- **Padmavati** - For the Rajput women, she is a heroic queen who had committed Jauhar to save her honour against a lusty Muslim invader.
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- She is thus a revered queen and seen as the epitome of sacrifice.
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- But rather than highlighting her sacrifice, the film is criticised of highlighting the romantic angle instead.
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- The visuals of the heroine singing and dancing evidently go against the patriarchal telling of Padmavati’s story, circumscribed by notions of purity and honour.
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- **Caste honour** - Karni Sena is a self-styled Rajput organisation which is very particular of caste honour.
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- This is now raising anxiety about the film’s scheduled release as it alleges that the film wrongly depicts the traditions in relation with the Rajput clan.
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What are the larger implications?

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- **Law and order** - The UP government has written to the Union I&B Ministry requesting that the CBFC be alerted of the “public sentiment” about distortion of “facts” in the film.
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- The characterisation and depiction of Muslim invaders and Hindu clans in the film could possibly lead to a communal clash.
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- Thus, there is an apprehension that the release of the film would lead to law and order disruption.
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- **Freedom of expression** - However, as per Supreme Court's earlier verdicts, a mere threat to public order cannot be a ground to suppress freedom of expression.
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- The insistence on demanding accuracy in period dramas is an infringement on creativity.
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- Notably, this is a film based on a work of fiction.
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- However, the controversy now is centred on the question of “historical facts” in connection with the film.
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- Reacting to this in legal terms is like endorsing the notions of Rajput honour and Hindu-Muslim enmity fuelled by random groups.
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Quick Fact

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Chittor Fort

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- The Chittor Fort or Chittorgarh in Rajasthan is one of the largest forts in India.
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- It is designated as a World Heritage Site by the UNESCO.
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- The fort was the capital of Mewar and is today situated in the Chittorgarh town.
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- It sprawls over a hill above the plains of the valley drained by the Berach River, a tributary of the Banas River.
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Source: The Hindu, Indian Express

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