The recent bout of uproar and subsequent vandalism by certain fringe groups surrounding the release of Padmavat has been making the headlines over the past few weeks. Even though prima facie, the issue appears to be a tussle between the Rajput community and the film-makers, at its heart it encapsulates a much larger debate about the freedom of expression guaranteed by the Constitution of India.

It is common knowledge that the freedom of expression guaranteed in Article 19 of the Constitution is not absolute, but instead, as specified by Article 19(2), restrictions can be imposed in case it threatens public order or breaches decency and morality. However, certain fringe groups, taking advantage of the subjective nature of this clause, have used it to thwart the release of the movie, and have gone so far as to place bounties on the heads of the actress and the film maker. It is disheartening to see such large-scale vandalism when the identity of Rani Padmavati is actually fictional. The film is based on the fictional work of a Sufi poet Malik Muhammad Jayasi, and as per a recent Supreme Court ruling, the disclaimer at the start of the movie that it is a work of fiction should put an end to the debate around whether it hurts the sentiments of a particular community by distorting historical figures. Further, it is appalling that the female lead of the movie has been singled out for such wrath. This goes on to show the patriarchal mindset that still besets the Indian society.

The fact that protestors were given a free reign in view of the upcoming elections in Gujarat in order to appease the Rajputs (which constitute a majority) highlights the majoritarianism gripping India’s political landscape. Furthermore, by delaying the release of the movie from December 1, the filmmakers allowed themselves to be held at ransom by a select few fringe groups. States such as Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, by petitioning the Supreme Court to ban the release have displayed short-sightedness when they could have used this opportunity to have a healthy debate around the freedom of creative expression and send a message that a threat to public order would not be tolerated. The fact of the matter is, a work of art needs to be judged on its own merit, free of the tinted lens of communalism, and the protests against such a work should be carried out in a legitimate way. Any threat to public order or the life of an individual must be taken for what it is – an act of violence and vandalism- and must be dealt with punitively.