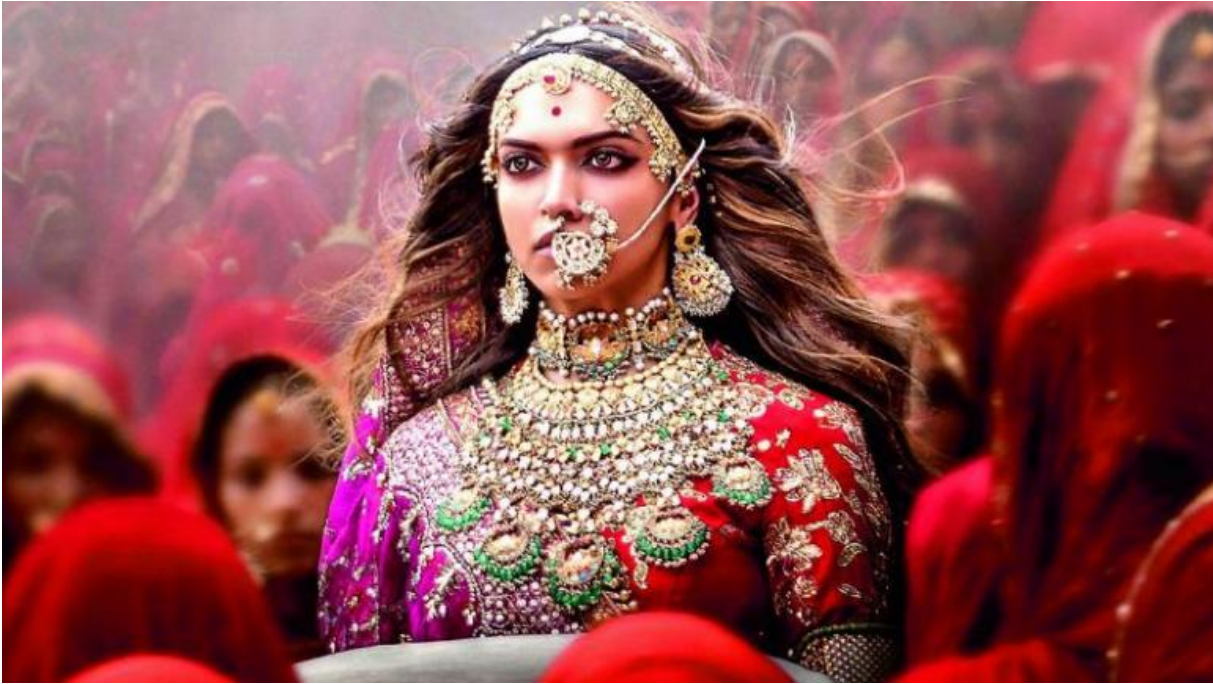


Burn the Women and Make It Look Pretty: Bollywood and Fascist Aesthetics



Professor Ajay Gehlawat, Sonoma State University

March 18, 2020, 7 pm

Danforth Lecture Hall (Art 120), Mills College

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Padmaavat* (2018) tells the tale of the legendary Rajput queen Padmavati who, along with her female followers, commits *jauhar*, or mass self-immolation, rather than face capture by the invading Muslim forces of the Sultan of Delhi, Alauddin Khilji. In recounting this tale, Bhansali hews to the historic dichotomization of Hindu and Muslim, presenting Rajputs as entirely noble figures and Muslims as essentially barbaric. Additionally, and just as problematically, Bhansali – who received death threats while making the film – glorifies the Rajputs' purported history and Padmavati's culminating *jauhar* via his fascist aesthetics. As one critic observed, 'Never has mass suicide looked this pretty on screen'. This talk will analyze Bhansali's use of such aesthetics to frame Hindu-Muslim relations in India with particular attention given to the cinematic depiction of female figures. In the process this talk will consider whether and how Bhansali's film can be seen as lending support to chauvinistic forces in India today.

Ajay Gehlawat is Professor of Theatre and Film at Sonoma State University and author of several studies of popular Hindi cinema including *Twenty-First Century Bollywood* (2015).