



ALLIANCE AGAINST ISLAMOPHOBIA (AUSTRALIA)

Submission by the Alliance Against Islamophobia (Australia)

Towards a New National Cultural Policy

**Recognising South Asian and Indian Muslim Culture, Heritage and Creative Participation
in Australia**

Public Submission

25 April 2026

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Introduction

The Alliance Against Islamophobia (Australia) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the next National Cultural Policy.¹

AAI supports a cultural policy framework that reflects the full breadth of Australia's multicultural life, strengthens belonging, and ensures that communities whose stories have been marginalised, misrepresented or structurally unseen are meaningfully included in Australia's cultural future.

This submission is directed to the consultation's focus on cultural participation, access, inclusion, creative expression, audience engagement, and the cultural infrastructure needed to ensure that Australia's stories are told accurately and fairly.

This submission focuses on the need for greater recognition of South Asian and Indian Muslim culture and heritage within Australia's national cultural policy settings.

South Asian and Indian Muslim communities are part of Australia's diverse social, cultural, linguistic, artistic and religious life.

Yet their cultural presence is often obscured within broad labels such as "Indian", "South Asian", "Desi", "Brown" or simply "Muslim".

These broad labels can be useful in some settings, but they can also conceal internal diversity, unequal power relations, and the distinct experiences of Indian and South Asian Muslims.

Current cultural policy and funding settings can unintentionally reproduce Hindu-majoritarian, generic "South Asian", or generic "Muslim" framings that obscure South Asian and Indian Muslim communities as distinct cultural actors.

This is not a request for separation. It is a request for accuracy, dignity and inclusion.

AAI respectfully submits that the next National Cultural Policy should expressly recognise and support South Asian and Indian Muslim cultural expression, heritage, artists, archives, memory work, and community-led cultural infrastructure.

¹ Office for the Arts, Towards a New National Cultural Policy: Public Consultation Paper, March 2026. Available online: <https://www.arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/public-consultation-paper-national-cultural-policy-2026.pdf>.

Executive Summary

AAI submits that the next National Cultural Policy should:

1. recognise South Asian and Indian Muslim culture and heritage as a distinct and important part of Australia's multicultural story;
2. ensure that "Indian" and "South Asian" cultural programming does not default to Hindu-majoritarian, Bollywood-centred or upper-caste Hindu cultural norms;
3. support community-led South Asian Muslim cultural archives, storytelling, oral history, literature, music, foodways, festivals, intergenerational memory work and creative practice;
4. ensure that Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Dalit, caste-oppressed, linguistic minority and other internally diverse South Asian communities are not treated as peripheral add-ons to dominant diaspora voices;
5. embed stronger cultural-equity safeguards in public funding, partnerships and multicultural cultural programming;
6. support artists and cultural workers from South Asian and Indian Muslim backgrounds to tell their own stories, including stories of migration, belonging, Islamophobia, Partition, caste, gender, family, language, faith, memory and solidarity;
7. strengthen cultural policy responses to anti-Muslim hate, dehumanisation, historical denial and far-right extremist narratives that seek to erase Muslim contributions to South Asian history and diaspora life;
8. support audience development, discoverability and national visibility for South Asian and Indian Muslim cultural work.

Recognising South Asian and Indian Muslim culture and heritage would assist government to strengthen social cohesion, improve the accuracy of multicultural representation, support emerging artists and cultural workers, and ensure that public cultural funding reaches communities whose stories have too often remained structurally unseen.

It would also help cultural institutions respond more effectively to Islamophobia, historical erasure and exclusionary diaspora narratives.

1. Why South Asian and Indian Muslim Cultural Recognition Matters

The National Cultural Policy consultation paper recognises that culture shapes how Australians see ourselves, how communities connect, and how Australia is understood globally. It also recognises that participation in culture fosters belonging, strengthens community resilience, and contributes to mental health and civic trust.

For Indian and South Asian Muslims, culture is not limited to religious practice.

It includes a rich civilisational archive of languages, poetry, storytelling, oral histories, foodways, dress, music, devotional traditions, architecture, memory, migration, and creative practice.

This heritage includes, among other things:

- Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi, Gujarati, Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu and other linguistic traditions;
- qawwali, na't, marsiya, poetry, ghazal, storytelling and devotional expression;
- Muharram, Eid, Sufi, shrine-based and regional ritual cultures;
- family recipes, dress, calligraphy, community gatherings and oral histories;
- memories of Partition, migration, post-colonial state violence, communal violence and diaspora settlement;
- contemporary literature, film, visual art, digital storytelling and youth-led cultural production.

These cultural traditions are not marginal to South Asian history. They are central to it.

Yet in Australia, South Asian Muslim heritage is often poorly recognised within mainstream cultural policy, multicultural programming, festival funding, diaspora representation and arts infrastructure.

2. The Problem: Structural Invisibility

AAI has previously described the structural invisibility of Indian and South Asian Muslim communities as the way institutions, public discourse, policy settings and community engagement frameworks can render these communities less visible, even where their experiences of exclusion or harm are real and significant.²

This structural invisibility operates in at least two ways.

First, Indian and South Asian Muslims may be obscured within broad representations of the “Indian community”, especially where dominant or well-networked diaspora voices are treated as representative of the whole.

Secondly, Indian and South Asian Muslims may be folded into generic understandings of “Muslim communities”, without sufficient recognition of the distinct ethnic, linguistic, caste, regional, migration and political realities that shape South Asian Muslim life.

The result is that these communities may be present in Australia, but not meaningfully seen in cultural funding, creative infrastructure, public consultation, arts programming, museum collections, oral history projects, literary spaces, screen narratives, or national cultural storytelling.

² Alliance Against Islamophobia (Australia), Structural Invisibility of Indian and South Asian Muslims in Australia: Inclusion, Representation and Funding, 25 April 2026. Provided as supporting material.

3. How Cultural Erasure Happens

Erasure is rarely a single act. It is often an accumulation of naming practices, institutional choices, funding decisions and public narratives.

In cultural policy and programming, this can occur when:

- “Indian culture” is treated as if it is synonymous with Hindu festivals, Hindu temple networks, Bollywood aesthetics or vegetarian-only cultural norms;
- “South Asian” cultural representation is organised around dominant voices without recognising internal religious, caste, linguistic and regional diversity;
- Muslim histories are treated as foreign, peripheral or politically sensitive rather than as integral to South Asian and Australian multicultural life;
- South Asian Muslim artists are expected to present only “safe”, apolitical or integration-oriented stories;
- community festivals funded as multicultural events reproduce exclusionary religious or caste-coded norms;
- cultural institutions do not collect, preserve or commission South Asian Muslim stories, archives and creative work.

For example, a publicly funded event presented as broadly “Indian” may in practice centre Hindu religious symbolism, Hindu-majoritarian cultural assumptions, vegetarian-only norms, or Bollywood aesthetics, while Muslim, Sikh, Christian, caste-oppressed and other minority South Asian traditions remain peripheral or absent.

The purpose is not to fragment multicultural policy, but to ensure that cultural recognition is accurate, inclusive and responsive to internal diversity.

A genuinely multicultural cultural policy must recognise internal diversity within diaspora communities. It must avoid treating the loudest or most institutionally connected voices as the whole community.

4. Islamophobia, Far-Right Hindu Extremism and Cultural Erasure

South Asian and Indian Muslim cultural heritage in the diaspora is being squeezed from multiple directions: generic “South Asian” labels that erase Muslim specificity, global Islamophobia, and increasingly organised Hindutva-aligned far-right narratives that export anti-Muslim politics and historical denial into diaspora spaces.

AAI has previously raised these concerns in its published Submission No. 7 to the NSW Parliamentary Committee on Law and Safety.³ That submission focused on diaspora-based far-right extremism operating through cultural, educational and community institutions, and its impacts on Muslim, Sikh, caste-oppressed Hindu and youth communities.

It also called for community-building safeguards, institutional due diligence, and public funding and partnership safeguards.

The NSW Parliamentary Committee on Law and Safety recently recognised evidence that far-right Hindu extremism is a form of right-wing extremism causing harm in NSW. The Committee noted evidence from AAI that Hindutva-aligned networks impact South Asian Muslim, Sikh and caste-oppressed Hindu communities, and expressly distinguished Hindutva from Hindu faith or belief.⁴

AAI and PATCA also gave evidence to the Committee about the impact of far-right Hindu extremist narratives on South Asian Muslim and caste-oppressed communities, with the relevant transcript published by the Committee in redacted form.⁵

AAI emphasises that its concern is not with Hinduism or Hindu Australians. Hindu communities are themselves diverse, and many Hindu Australians are committed to inclusion, pluralism and social cohesion.

AAI’s concern is with supremacist, dehumanising and exclusionary political ideologies that seek to collapse Indian identity into Hindu-majoritarian identity and treat Muslim presence as foreign, suspect or illegitimate.

³ Alliance Against Islamophobia (Australia), Submission No. 7 to the NSW Parliamentary Committee on Law and Safety Inquiry into Measures to Combat Right-Wing Extremism in New South Wales, January 2026. Available online : [https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/ladocs/submissions/94293/Submission 7 - Alliance Against Islamophobia \(Australia\).pdf](https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/ladocs/submissions/94293/Submission%207%20-%20Alliance%20Against%20Islamophobia%20(Australia).pdf)

⁴ NSW Legislative Assembly Committee on Law and Safety, Measures to Combat Right-Wing Extremism in New South Wales: Final Report, April 2026. Available online: [https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/ladocs/inquiries/3160/Final Report - Measures to combat right-wing extremism in NSW.pdf](https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/ladocs/inquiries/3160/Final%20Report%20-%20Measures%20to%20combat%20right-wing%20extremism%20in%20NSW.pdf)

⁵ NSW Legislative Assembly Committee on Law and Safety, In-camera Evidence of Alliance Against Islamophobia and Periyar Ambedkar Thoughts Circle of Australia, 18 February 2026, published with names redacted. Available online: [https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/ladocs/transcripts/3679/Transcript - Measures to combat ring-wing extremism in NSW - 18 February 2026.pdf](https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/ladocs/transcripts/3679/Transcript%20-%20Measures%20to%20combat%20ring-wing%20extremism%20in%20NSW%20-%2018%20February%202026.pdf)

These dynamics directly intersect with arts, screen content, public events, cultural partnerships, festivals, collections and community programming supported through public cultural policy.

This has direct cultural consequences. It can lead to:

- erasure of Muslim contributions to South Asian history;
- hostility to Muslim cultural expression in diaspora settings;
- pressure on cultural institutions to avoid “sensitive” Muslim stories;
- normalisation of narratives that depict Muslims as invaders, threats or outsiders;
- intimidation or silencing of Muslim, anti-caste, Sikh, Christian and dissenting Hindu artists and scholars;
- narrowing of what is publicly recognised as “Indian” or “South Asian” culture.

AAI’s submission on classification reform has also raised concerns about dehumanising, conspiratorial and exclusionary portrayals of Muslims in some recent Bollywood and wider Indian media content, noting that such narratives can contribute to hostility, fear and social exclusion in diaspora settings. ⁶

Cultural policy cannot solve these harms alone. But it can help ensure that public cultural infrastructure does not reinforce them.

⁶ Alliance Against Islamophobia (Australia), Submission on Modernising and Harmonising Classification Standards, 25 April 2026. Provided as supporting material.

5. Relevance to the Five Pillars of the National Cultural Policy

Pillar 1: First Nations First

AAI strongly supports the central place of First Nations stories, cultural rights, languages, leadership and self-determination in Australia's cultural policy.

South Asian and Indian Muslim communities should be encouraged and supported to engage with Australia's cultural life in ways that respect First Nations sovereignty, truth-telling and cultural leadership.

AAI also notes the importance of solidaristic cultural practice. South Asian Muslim communities have histories of solidarity with Indigenous, Black, Palestinian, anti-caste and other justice movements.

The next National Cultural Policy should support intercultural and community-led projects that build ethical relationships between migrant communities and First Nations peoples.

Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story

This is the pillar most directly relevant to AAI's submission.

A place for every story must include the stories of Indian and South Asian Muslims. It must also include the stories of communities who are often erased within broader diaspora labels, including caste-oppressed Hindus, Dalits, Sikhs, Christians, linguistic minorities and other marginalised South Asian communities.

AAI recommends that the next National Cultural Policy expressly recognise that diversity exists not only between communities, but also within communities.

This means that cultural policy should not assume that a single "Indian community", "South Asian community" or "Muslim community" voice can speak for all.

Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist

South Asian and Indian Muslim artists, writers, musicians, filmmakers, poets, performers, researchers and cultural workers should be supported as creators in their own right.

This includes artists whose work explores:

- Islamophobia and belonging;
- migration, memory and family;
- language loss and revival;
- gender and community hierarchy;
- South Asian Muslim women's experiences;
- solidarity with other marginalised communities;
- devotional, poetic, literary and musical traditions.

Artists from marginalised communities often carry the burden of explaining harm while also being asked to produce "celebratory" multicultural content.

Cultural policy should support the full range of creative expression, including joy, grief, critique, resistance, memory, humour, faith and beauty.

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Strong cultural infrastructure must include community-led archives, collections, oral history projects, cultural centres, digital repositories, festivals, libraries, publishing pathways and local creative spaces that support under-recognised communities.

AAI recommends targeted support for South Asian and Indian Muslim cultural infrastructure, including:

- oral history projects documenting Indian and South Asian Muslim migration to Australia;
- digital archives of South Asian Muslim community life;
- support for Urdu, Bengali, Tamil, Malayalam, Gujarati, Punjabi, Telugu and other South Asian Muslim linguistic traditions;
- community-based exhibitions, festivals, literary events and intergenerational storytelling;
- partnerships with libraries, museums, universities and local councils;
- preservation of family histories, photographs, letters, recipes, songs and community memories;
- youth-led cultural documentation and creative practice.

The policy should also ensure that funding bodies apply cultural-equity safeguards so that public money does not unintentionally entrench exclusionary or majoritarian forms of diaspora representation.

Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience

South Asian and Indian Muslim cultural work should not remain invisible to broader Australian audiences.

AAI recommends investment in audience development, discoverability and public presentation for South Asian Muslim stories across:

- schools and arts education;
- public libraries;
- museums and galleries;
- literary festivals;
- local government cultural programming;
- screen and digital platforms;
- national collecting institutions;
- community festivals and touring programs.

This would allow Australian audiences to encounter the depth, diversity and creativity of South Asian Muslim heritage beyond stereotypes of Muslims as security problems, migrants in need of integration, or passive recipients of multicultural services.

6. Recommendations

AAI respectfully recommends that the Australian Government adopt the following measures.

Recognition and safeguards

1. Expressly recognise South Asian and Indian Muslim culture and heritage within the next National Cultural Policy.
2. Require cultural funding and programming frameworks to recognise internal diversity within “Indian”, “South Asian” and “Muslim” communities.
3. Develop cultural-equity guidelines to prevent publicly funded “multicultural” programming from reproducing exclusionary religious, caste-based or majoritarian norms.
4. Ensure that cultural policy responses to diversity include both protection from vilification and dehumanisation, and active support for cultural work that counters historical erasure, anti-Muslim harm and exclusionary extremist narratives.

Cultural infrastructure and funding

5. Support community-led South Asian and Indian Muslim archives, oral histories, storytelling, festivals, exhibitions, music, literature and digital cultural projects.
6. Invest in translation, multilingual cultural programming and language preservation relevant to South Asian Muslim communities.
7. Support research and mapping of under-recognised South Asian Muslim cultural heritage in Australia.

Artists, communities and audiences

8. Ensure that Creative Australia, Writing Australia, Music Australia, national collecting institutions and relevant funding bodies actively engage with South Asian Muslim artists and cultural organisations.
9. Support South Asian Muslim women, youth and emerging artists to lead cultural projects reflecting their own experiences.
10. Encourage partnerships between South Asian Muslim communities, First Nations organisations, anti-caste organisations, universities, libraries, museums and arts bodies.

Implementation and engagement

11. Engage AAI and relevant South Asian Muslim community organisations in the development of cultural-equity guidance, consultation processes and implementation measures relating to Indian and South Asian Muslim cultural recognition.

7. Implementation and Engagement With AAI

AAI respectfully submits that implementation of the next National Cultural Policy should include direct engagement with community organisations that have relevant lived, cultural and subject-matter expertise, including organisations working with South Asian and Indian Muslim communities.

AAI would welcome the opportunity to assist the Office for the Arts, Creative Australia and relevant cultural institutions to better understand the structural invisibility of Indian and South Asian Muslims, the cultural impacts of Islamophobia, and practical ways to strengthen inclusive cultural programming, funding and representation.

AAI would also welcome participating in the co-design of cultural-equity guidance, including practical screening questions for funding programs, partnerships and publicly supported cultural events.

Conclusion

Australia's next National Cultural Policy is an opportunity to make visible communities whose stories have too often remained structurally unseen.

South Asian and Indian Muslim communities are not peripheral to Australia's multicultural story. They are part of it. Their languages, poetry, music, memory, faith, foodways, artistic traditions, histories of migration, and experiences of belonging and exclusion are part of the cultural fabric of this country.

A cultural policy that truly provides "a place for every story" must ensure that Indian and South Asian Muslim stories are not erased under broad labels, displaced by dominant diaspora voices, or silenced by Islamophobia and far-right extremist narratives.

AAI would welcome the opportunity to engage further with the Office for the Arts, Creative Australia and relevant cultural institutions on practical ways to strengthen recognition, representation and support for South Asian and Indian Muslim culture and heritage in Australia.

References / Source Materials

1. Office for the Arts, *Towards a New National Cultural Policy: Public Consultation Paper*, March 2026. Available online: <https://www.arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/public-consultation-paper-national-cultural-policy-2026.pdf>.
2. Alliance Against Islamophobia (Australia), *Structural Invisibility of Indian and South Asian Muslims in Australia: Inclusion, Representation and Funding*, 25 April 2026. Provided as supporting material.
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5. NSW Legislative Assembly Committee on Law and Safety, *In-camera Evidence of Alliance Against Islamophobia and Periyar Ambedkar Thoughts Circle of Australia*, 18 February 2026, published with names redacted. Available online: [https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/ladocs/transcripts/3679/Transcript - Measures to Combat Right-Wing Extremism in NSW - 18 February 2026.pdf](https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/ladocs/transcripts/3679/Transcript%20-%20Measures%20to%20Combat%20Right-Wing%20Extremism%20in%20NSW%20-%2018%20February%202026.pdf)
6. Alliance Against Islamophobia (Australia), *Submission on Modernising and Harmonising Classification Standards*, 25 April 2026. Provided as supporting material.