

Submission to the next National Cultural Policy

From Anupam Sharma

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I write this submission in my personal capacity. Not as the head of a company, festival or council, although I have had the privilege of building and leading all three. I write as someone who has spent most of his adult life standing between two countries, two film cultures, two ways of seeing the world, Australia and India, and trying to convince each that the other matters.

For more than three decades, I have worked as a filmmaker, producer, line producer, executive producer, consultant, festival founder, public speaker and advocate. I have worked on hundreds of screen projects involving Australia, India and the wider world. Some were large commercial films, some were small independent works made with very little money but enormous heart, some were policy conversations, delegations, masterclasses, location negotiations, cultural translations, quiet phone calls and impossible introductions that never appear in a credit roll.

I have seen, up close, how culture moves before policy does. I have seen the Australian screen industry slowly begin to understand India not only as a market, but as a civilisation, a creative force, a neighbour, a partner and a mirror. I have also seen how much of that work has been done by individuals and small organisations before the system found the language to describe it.

That is why this next National Cultural Policy matters.

A policy is not only a document about the arts. It is a chance to decide who we think Australia is becoming.

Australia's cultural future is already multicultural, Indo-Pacific and global

Back in the late 90s, one of the first Indian born Australian film graduates with a thesis on Indian Cinema, when I first began building screen links between Australia and India, the work was often lonely and difficult to navigate. Few people in Australia understood the scale, complexity and sophistication of Indian cinema. Too often, India was reduced to Bollywood, colour, dance and spectacle. At the same time, many Indian producers saw Australia mainly as a beautiful location, not as a country with its own stories, talent, crews, First Nations cultures, migrant histories and creative depth.

My work has often been to stand in the middle and say: look again.

To Australians, I have said: India is not a singular industry. It is an amalgamation of the many languages, many regions, many audiences and many ways of imagining the world.

To Indians, I have said: Australia is not only beaches, bridges and landscapes. It is an ancient continent, a modern multicultural society, a country of First Nations stories, migrant identities, regional voices and new narratives, still fighting to be heard.

That work of cultural translation-takes trust, time, mistakes, humility and persistence. It is often invisible, but without it, international cultural relationships do not grow.

The next National Cultural Policy should recognise this kind of bridge-building as cultural infrastructure.

Diversity must move from language to power

Australia has become much better at speaking about diversity. But language is not enough. For many years, culturally diverse artists have been invited into rooms to provide authenticity, community access, advice, introductions and cultural nuance. We have been asked to explain our communities, translate our cultures, attract audiences, solve representation problems and help institutions look more inclusive.

Too often, we have done this without the same access to long-term funding, decision-making power, ownership, producing authority or institutional trust.

That must change.

However, diversity is not only about representation in a film, festival, gallery, book or performance. It is about agency and power, who owns the company, who controls the intellectual property, who decides what gets made, who sits on boards, who curates, who gets development money, who gets the benefit of doubt and who is trusted to lead, not only advise.

This is more urgent now than ever as Australia's population has changed. Our audiences have changed. Our artists have changed. But our power structures have not changed enough. If the next policy truly believes in "a place for every story", it must also create a place for every storyteller to lead.

First Nations First must remain the foundation

As a migrant to this country, and as someone who works across cultures, I believe strongly that First Nations First must remain the first pillar of national cultural policy.

Australia's multicultural future should. ~~It~~ should be built by learning from the first national culture, respecting it, and ensuring that all cultural engagement is grounded in proper protocols, relationships and respect. This also extends to the diverse cultures in screen work.

In my own work across Australia and India, I have found that international partners are often deeply moved when they understand that Australia is not a young country, but an ancient one. We do ourselves a disservice when we sell Australia only as locations and incentives. We must also present Australia as a place of profound cultural inheritance.

The next policy should ensure that international cultural engagement includes strong First Nations protocols, education and leadership.

The Australia-India relationship needs more than goodwill

The Australia-India screen relationship has entered a new phase. There is now a co-production agreement. There is government interest. There are festivals, councils, companies, producers, students and audiences ready to engage.

What Australia needs now, is a long-term, funded Australia-India screen and cultural exchange framework that does not end at a panel event, photo ops or delegation visit. : Not a one-off delegation. Not a photo opportunity. Not a panel that disappears when the event ends. We need development support for stories that connect the two countries. We need producer labs, writer exchanges, student pathways, distribution support, subtitling, market education and treaty guidance.

India is one of the world's most important screen cultures. Australia is home to one of the world's most dynamic Indian diasporas. We need the two industries to understand the mechanics and workings of each other beyond surface level, and for the diaspora communities to be central in the conversation.

The next National Cultural Policy can help aid that.

Culture is not soft; culture is power

In public life, culture is still sometimes treated as decoration. Something nice to have after the "serious" work is done.

But anyone who has worked in cinema knows this is wrong.

Culture shapes how countries see each other. A film can change how millions imagine a place. A festival can make a community feel visible. A documentary can shift public memory. A co-production can create jobs, tourism, training, diplomacy, investment and friendship. A young person seeing their language on an Australian screen can feel, perhaps for the first time, that they belong to the national story.

I have seen Indian audiences discover Australia through film. I have seen Australian audiences discover the emotional and artistic range of Indian cinema. I have seen young Indian Australians sit taller in cinemas because their culture was not being treated as exotic or marginal, but as central, sophisticated and worthy of attention.

That is not soft. That is power.

Small organisations often carry national responsibilities

Much of Australia's cultural bridge-building is carried by small companies, festivals, councils and individuals. We are expected to be entrepreneurial, diplomatic, culturally fluent, commercially alert, politically careful and endlessly resilient. We often do work that benefits the government, tourism, trade, education and diplomacy, but we are rarely funded with that full value in mind.

A small screen company may spend years building trust with an overseas industry. A festival may create the only platform through which a community sees itself properly represented. A council may provide practical advice that saves producers from costly mistakes. A cultural consultant may prevent harm, build confidence and open doors.

These are not minor contributions. They are national assets.

The next National Cultural Policy should create better support for small and medium cultural organisations that carry international, multicultural and diaspora-facing responsibilities. Multi-year support is essential. One-off project funding cannot build long-term relationships.

Artists are workers, but they are also witnesses

I welcome the recognition in recent cultural policy that artists are workers. This remains essential. Artists and arts workers must be paid fairly. They need safe workplaces, rights protection, access to education, and recognition of the many forms of labour that sit around creative work.

But artists are not only workers. They are also witnesses.

They witness what a country is becoming before others can name it. They notice who is missing. They hear the accents that have not yet reached the stage. They see the stories still waiting outside the funding guidelines. They feel the contradiction between the Australia we celebrate and the Australia we have not yet supported.

I have spent my career witnessing an Australia that is more Asian, more Indian, more multilingual, more hybrid, more ambitious and more connected to the world than our cultural structures sometimes admit.

The next policy should listen to those who have been witnessing this change from the ground.

Recommendations

In my personal capacity, I recommend that the next National Cultural Policy:

1. Recognise diaspora-led cultural work as national cultural infrastructure, not only community activity.
2. Support diaspora not because they are diaspora but because of their work and reputation. Supporting without due diligence and supporting diaspora with chequered past demoralises the community and the industry as witnessed in Victor India relations.
3. Support culturally diverse artists and producers not only through representation, but through ownership, leadership and long-term investment.
4. Establish a dedicated Australia–India screen and cultural exchange framework with real funding and cross-agency coordination.
5. Strengthen links between cultural policy, screen policy, trade, tourism, education and diplomacy.
6. Support small and medium cultural organisations that build long-term international relationships.
7. Fund subtitling, translation, cultural consultancy, access, community outreach and audience development as skilled creative labour.
8. Embed First Nations protocols and leadership in international cultural engagement.
9. Invest in young and emerging artists from migrant and diaspora backgrounds, especially those working across languages and borders.
10. Treat festivals, councils, independent companies and cultural connectors as part of the national ecosystem.
11. Build policy that reflects the Australia we are becoming, not only the Australia our institutions were originally designed to serve.

Conclusion

I am grateful that my life and work have allowed me to belong, in different ways, to both Australia, and India.

I know what it feels like to build bridges before there is funding for them-and what it feels like to explain why India matters before it becomes strategically obvious. I know what it feels like to argue that Australian stories are richer when migrant stories are not placed at the edge. I know what it feels like to do cultural work for years before the system recognises it as infrastructure.

The next National Cultural Policy has the chance to recognise that work, not only mine, but the work of many artists, producers, community leaders, festival directors, educators, translators, programmers and cultural workers who have helped Australia become more honest about itself.

Australia does not need a cultural policy that simply preserves what already exists.

It needs a policy that is brave enough to see what is emerging.

A country where First Nations culture is foundational.

Where migrant stories are not marginal.

Where artists are respected as workers and witnesses.

Where small organisations are trusted as builders.

Where Australia understands its place in the Indo-Pacific.

Where our stories travel with confidence.

Where every child, in every language, can feel that their story belongs here.

That is the Australia I have tried to serve through my work.

That is the Australia I hope the next National Cultural Policy will help build.

Signed

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Biog Enclosed for Reference