

Periyar Ambedkar Thoughts Circle of Australia

SUBMISSION TO THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT

Towards a New National Cultural Policy

April 2026



PERIYAR AMBEDKAR THOUGHTS CIRCLE OF AUSTRALIA

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Submission to

Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development,
Communications, Sport and the Arts

Towards a New National Cultural Policy

Submitted by:

Periyar Ambedkar Thoughts Circle of Australia (PATCA)

Subject:

Recognising Caste-Oppressed Communities in Australia's National Cultural Policy

1. About PATCA

Periyar Ambedkar Thoughts Circle of Australia (PATCA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Australian Government's consultation on the next National Cultural Policy.

PATCA is a community advocacy organisation committed to addressing caste-based discrimination, social exclusion, and the structural invisibility of caste-oppressed communities in Australia.

Inspired by the teachings of Periyar E.V. Ramasamy and Dr B.R. Ambedkar, PATCA works across education, public policy, multicultural affairs, anti-racism, community safety, and human rights to advance equality, dignity, and justice for caste-oppressed communities.

PATCA's work has included submissions to federal and state inquiries, engagement with the Australian Human Rights Commission's National Anti-Racism Framework process, advocacy on caste-inclusive multicultural practice, and policy work concerning the inclusion, safety, and representation of caste-oppressed Hindu, Bahujan, Dalit, Adivasi, Tamil, South Indian, and other marginalised South Asian communities.

2. Basis of this submission

This submission draws primarily on publicly available reports of the Australian Human Rights Commission, FECCA's national consultations with multicultural communities¹, and PATCA's ongoing community engagement, advocacy and lived-experience knowledge concerning caste-oppressed Hindu, Bahujan, Dalit, Adivasi, Tamil and other marginalised South Asian communities in Australia.

The Australian Human Rights Commission has recognised that casteism affects civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights, and can operate in interpersonal, institutional and structurally invisibilised ways.

FECCA's national consultations, commissioned by the Australian Human Rights Commission, also included specific consultations with communities with prominent caste systems and recorded concerns about caste-based discrimination, exclusion and the need for intersectional, community-led responses.

¹ Australian Human Rights Commission. (2024). An anti-racism framework: Experiences and perspectives of multicultural Australia – Report on the national community consultations. Australian Human Rights Commission. <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/race-discrimination/publications/anti-racism-framework-perspectives-multicultural>

3. Executive Summary

PATCA submits that the next National Cultural Policy must explicitly recognise the structural invisibility of caste-oppressed communities in Australia's cultural life.

The consultation paper states that cultural policy is not only about the arts, but about the place of culture in Australia, and about building a cultural landscape that reflects our diversity, supports creative workers, and strengthens the nation we share.²

It also recognises that cultural participation strengthens belonging, community resilience, mental health and civic trust.

For caste-oppressed communities, cultural participation is not simply about access to festivals, performances, arts funding or public events. It is about whether our histories, ancestral traditions, food practices, stories, leaders, intellectual traditions, and spiritual identities are recognised as legitimate parts of Australia's cultural landscape.

At present, caste-oppressed communities are often rendered invisible within broad categories such as "Indian", "Hindu", "South Asian", "Tamil" or "multicultural". These categories may appear inclusive, but in practice they can obscure deep internal hierarchies, power imbalances, and patterns of exclusion.

The Australian Human Rights Commission has recognised that casteism affects civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights, and takes interpersonal, institutional and "structurally invisibilised" forms.³

Through its ongoing community engagement and advocacy, PATCA has observed that caste-based exclusion can be reproduced through cultural events, faith-linked infrastructure, advisory bodies, food programs and multicultural consultation processes, particularly where dominant-caste organisations are treated as the default representatives of broader Hindu, Indian, Tamil or South Asian communities.

PATCA therefore urges the Australian Government to ensure that the next National Cultural Policy includes caste-inclusive safeguards across arts funding, cultural infrastructure, public festivals, community representation, cultural education, and national storytelling.

² Office for the Arts. (2026). Public consultation paper for a new National Cultural Policy. Australian Government. <https://www.arts.gov.au/publications/public-consultation-paper-new-national-cultural-policy>

³ Australian Human Rights Commission. (2022). National Anti-Racism Framework: Scoping report 2022. Australian Human Rights Commission. https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/national_anti-racism_framework_scoping_report_2022_0.pdf

4. Key Recommendations

PATCA recommends that the Australian Government:

1. **Explicitly recognise caste-based discrimination and caste-based cultural exclusion** as barriers to equal participation in Australian cultural life.
2. **Embed caste-inclusive principles** within the National Cultural Policy, particularly under Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story.
3. Require publicly funded cultural programs, festivals, arts bodies and community events to adopt Do No Harm principles, ensuring that public funding does not unintentionally legitimise caste hierarchy, cultural erasure, vilification, or exclusionary representations.
4. Require cultural funding bodies, including Creative Australia and relevant government agencies, to develop **caste-inclusive cultural risk assessment processes** for publicly funded cultural and religious events.
5. Ensure that dominant-caste or majoritarian organisations are not treated as the default or sole representatives of “Hindu”, “Indian”, “South Asian”, “Tamil” or multicultural communities.
6. Establish direct consultation pathways with caste-oppressed Hindu, Bahujan, Dalit, Adivasi, Tamil, South Indian and other marginalised South Asian communities.
7. Support community-led cultural projects that preserve, celebrate and amplify caste-oppressed histories, arts, foodways, music, literature, ancestral traditions, and anti-caste intellectual traditions.
8. Improve data collection, funding access and reporting mechanisms to identify barriers faced by structurally invisibilised communities.
9. Encourage cultural institutions, schools, universities, museums, libraries, festivals and arts bodies to develop caste literacy and caste-inclusive programming.
10. Ensure that the next National Cultural Policy aligns with the Australian Human Rights Commission’s National Anti-Racism Framework, including its recommendation that government investigate options for legal protections against caste discrimination.
11. Ensure that public cultural funding processes recognise “diversity within diversity”, so that broad labels such as “Indian”, “Hindu”, “Tamil”, “South Asian” or “multicultural” do not obscure the specific experiences of caste-oppressed communities.

5. Why Caste Must Be Addressed in Cultural Policy

The National Cultural Policy consultation paper recognises that culture shapes how Australians see ourselves and how the world sees us. For caste-oppressed communities, this question is urgent: who gets to define our culture, and whose stories are treated as representative?

Caste is an ancestry and descent-based system of social hierarchy that has affected South Asian communities for centuries and continues to operate in diaspora contexts, including Australia. It is not confined to India, nor is it confined to private religious belief.

It can shape access to housing, employment, education, community life, religious participation, cultural belonging, social status, and public recognition.

Caste-based discrimination often operates invisibly to those outside South Asian communities. This is why cultural policy must go beyond surface-level multiculturalism. The mere presence of a South Asian, Indian, Hindu or Tamil cultural event does not necessarily mean that all communities within those labels are included or represented.

PATCA's previous submissions have emphasised that broad terms such as "CALD" or "multicultural communities" can obscure the specific experiences of caste-oppressed communities.

In the cultural policy context, this means that funding and recognition may flow to organisations that present themselves as representing an entire community, while caste-oppressed communities remain excluded from decision-making, cultural programming and public storytelling.⁴

A National Cultural Policy that promises "a place for every story" must ensure that caste-oppressed communities are not erased inside broader community categories.

⁴ Submission to the Multicultural Framework Review Anonymous submission no. 154. (2023). Department of Home Affairs. <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/reports-and-publications/submissions-and-discussion-papers/multicultural-framework-review>

6. Structural Invisibility and Cultural Erasure

1. PATCA submits that structural invisibility is one of the key barriers preventing caste-oppressed communities from fully participating in Australia's cultural life.
2. Structural invisibility occurs when the experiences, needs and cultural identities of a community are not recognised in policy, funding, data, consultation, leadership, or public representation. For caste-oppressed communities, this invisibility can occur when:
 - dominant-caste organisations are treated as the default representatives of Hindu or South Asian communities;
 - caste-oppressed voices are excluded from advisory bodies, festivals, cultural hubs and funding decisions;
 - cultural practices rooted in caste hierarchy are presented as neutral multicultural celebration;
 - caste-oppressed food practices, ancestral figures, local deities and spiritual traditions are stigmatised or erased;
 - anti-caste thinkers such as Dr B.R. Ambedkar, Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Fatima Sheikh and others are absent from cultural and educational programming;
 - caste-based harm is dismissed as an overseas issue, an internal community dispute, or a matter too sensitive to address.
3. PATCA's community engagement indicates that caste-oppressed communities may be excluded from cultural and religious participation through publicly supported festivals, faith-linked infrastructure, advisory bodies, food programs and multicultural consultation processes. These patterns are consistent with the Australian Human Rights Commission's recognition that casteism can operate in interpersonal, institutional and structurally invisibilised ways.
4. The next National Cultural Policy should recognise that cultural participation is not only about access to venues or audiences. It is also about power: who is funded, who is consulted, who speaks, who is represented, and whose cultural traditions are treated as legitimate.

7. Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story

PATCA strongly supports Pillar 2 of the National Cultural Policy: A Place for Every Story.

However, for this pillar to be meaningful, the policy must recognise that not every community has equal power to tell its own story. Within many diaspora communities, internal hierarchies can determine whose culture is publicly celebrated and whose culture is silenced.

For caste-oppressed Hindu, Bahujan, Dalit, Adivasi, Tamil, South Indian and other marginalised South Asian communities, this means that our stories are often absent from mainstream cultural representation. Our communities may be included numerically within “Indian” or “Hindu” cultural programming while being excluded substantively from decision-making and narrative control.

A genuine “place for every story” requires:

- recognition of caste-oppressed communities as distinct stakeholders in cultural policy;
- direct funding pathways for caste-oppressed community-led arts and cultural projects;
- safeguards against representational gatekeeping;
- inclusion of anti-caste, Dravidian, Ambedkarite, Bahujan, Dalit, Adivasi and caste-oppressed intellectual and artistic traditions;
- recognition of plural Hindu traditions, rather than treating dominant-caste interpretations as universal Hindu culture;
- support for cultural practices, histories and ancestral traditions that have been marginalised by caste hierarchy.

This is not about excluding any community. It is about ensuring that Australia’s cultural policy reflects the full diversity within diversity.

8. Public Funding and Cultural Harm

PATCA is concerned that public funding, venues, sponsorship and institutional support can unintentionally legitimise caste-based exclusion if appropriate safeguards are not in place.

Cultural events are often framed as celebrations of diversity. However, where an event reproduces caste hierarchy, glorifies symbolic violence against figures revered by caste-oppressed communities, excludes caste-oppressed voices, or stigmatises food practices associated with caste-oppressed communities, public support may cause real cultural harm.

PATCA is concerned that where cultural funding or public venues support events without adequate consultation with caste-oppressed communities, this may contribute to alienation, cultural erasure and loss of confidence in government neutrality.

Evidence given to the NSW Legislative Assembly Committee on Law and Safety also highlighted how caste-oppressed communities can be rendered invisible when public institutions treat dominant or louder community voices as representative of the whole Indian or Hindu diaspora.⁵

Witnesses raised concerns that government-supported cultural activities may unintentionally reinforce caste-based exclusion where they fail to recognise internal diversity, including in relation to food practices, religious symbolism, community representation and cultural safety.

PATCA also submits that cultural policy should be sensitive to the way dietary norms can operate within caste contexts.

For example, vegetarian-only frameworks in some Hindu cultural settings may be experienced by South Indian, Tamil and caste-oppressed communities as reinforcing notions of purity and pollution, particularly where meat-eating traditions are stigmatised or erased.

⁵ New South Wales Parliament, Committee on Law and Safety. (2026, February 18). Measures to combat right-wing extremism in New South Wales: Transcript of proceedings Public hearing transcript. Parliament of New South Wales. <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/ladocs/transcripts/3679/Transcript%20-%20Measures%20to%20combat%20ring-wing%20extremism%20in%20NSW%20-%202018%20February%202026.pdf>

The National Cultural Policy should therefore require cultural funding bodies to consider whether publicly funded programs:

- include or exclude caste-oppressed communities;
- present one dominant tradition as universal;
- reproduce caste-based stigma or purity-pollution norms;
- involve symbolic practices that demean communities or ancestral figures;
- provide culturally safe avenues for affected communities to raise concerns;
- demonstrate inclusive governance and consultation.

This would not prevent cultural expression. Rather, it would ensure that publicly supported cultural expression is consistent with equality, dignity and inclusion.

Failure to apply caste-inclusive safeguards may also create reputational risk for cultural funding bodies, reduce public confidence in government neutrality, and result in public funding unintentionally entrenching exclusion rather than advancing genuine multicultural inclusion.

9. Do No Harm and Caste-Inclusive Cultural Risk Assessment

PATCA recommends that the National Cultural Policy adopt a Do No Harm framework for publicly funded cultural activities.

This should include caste-inclusive cultural risk assessment processes for festivals, grants, cultural infrastructure, arts programs, community hubs, museums, libraries, schools, universities and publicly funded cultural partnerships.

A caste-inclusive cultural risk assessment should consider:

1. whether caste-oppressed communities have been consulted;
2. whether the event or program presents dominant-caste traditions as universal;
3. whether any ritual, symbol, narrative or performance may vilify, degrade, exclude or erase caste-oppressed communities;
4. whether food practices, dress, language, surnames, rituals or ancestral traditions associated with caste-oppressed communities are being stigmatised;
5. whether cultural leadership and governance reflect diversity within Hindu, Indian, Tamil and South Asian communities;
6. whether safe complaint and feedback mechanisms exist;
7. whether funding agreements include anti-discrimination and cultural safety obligations.

PATCA recommends that the National Cultural Policy adopt practical safeguards such as Do No Harm clauses, cultural-risk assessments, inclusive governance standards, caste-inclusion benchmarks and community-led working groups.

These concepts should be adapted nationally for cultural policy.

10. Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist

PATCA supports the policy's commitment to the centrality of the artist. However, caste-oppressed artists and cultural workers can face distinct barriers to recognition and opportunity.

These barriers include:

- lack of funding access for caste-oppressed community organisations;
- exclusion from mainstream Indian, Hindu or South Asian cultural networks;
- pressure to remain silent about caste-based harm;
- fear of retaliation or social ostracisation;
- limited visibility in arts institutions and multicultural programming;
- under-recognition of anti-caste artistic traditions.

The next National Cultural Policy should support caste-oppressed artists, writers, musicians, performers, filmmakers, academics, curators and cultural workers to tell their own stories.

This could include:

- targeted funding rounds for caste-oppressed and structurally invisibilised communities;
- partnerships with anti-caste community organisations;
- support for Ambedkarite, Periyarist, Bahujan, Dalit, Adivasi, Tamil and South Indian cultural events;
- artist development programs for marginalised South Asian creators;
- protections against harassment or backlash where artists address caste, Hindutva, religious majoritarianism, or intra-community discrimination.

The centrality of the artist must include artists whose work challenges hierarchy, exclusion and cultural silencing.

11. Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Cultural infrastructure is not only buildings, institutions or funding systems. It is also governance, representation, accountability and trust.

PATCA submits that strong cultural infrastructure requires safeguards against the monopolisation of community representation.

Where government funds a cultural hub, festival, advisory body, museum program, school partnership or community arts initiative, it should not assume that one organisation can speak for all Hindus, Indians, Tamils or South Asians.

PATCA submits that strong cultural infrastructure requires inclusive stewardship, where decision-making, policies and cultural practices are accountable to all sections of the community, especially the most marginalised. Inclusive stewardship requires safeguarding caste-oppressed traditions from erasure, affirming plural histories and practices, and ensuring governance does not become monopolised by ideologically aligned or dominant-caste actors..

The National Cultural Policy should require publicly funded cultural infrastructure to demonstrate:

- inclusive governance;
- transparent consultation;
- diversity within community representation;
- anti-discrimination safeguards;
- community accountability;
- culturally safe feedback and complaint pathways;
- direct engagement with caste-oppressed communities.

This would strengthen public trust and ensure that cultural infrastructure serves the whole community, not only the most powerful or visible organisations.

12. Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience

PATCA supports the goal of ensuring Australian stories connect with people at home and abroad. However, this requires audiences to encounter the full complexity of Australia's multicultural communities.

Caste-oppressed communities should not appear only as victims of discrimination. Our communities have rich artistic, intellectual, musical, literary, spiritual and political traditions.

These include traditions of resistance, rationalism, self-respect, social reform, labour dignity, gender justice, anti-caste thought, folk culture, Dravidian history, Dalit literature, Bahujan arts, Adivasi knowledge, and community-led storytelling.

The next National Cultural Policy should support audiences to engage with these traditions through:

- national cultural programming;
- library and museum exhibitions;
- documentary and screen projects;
- community arts festivals;
- school and university partnerships;
- public lectures and writers' festivals;
- translation and publication programs;
- oral history and archival initiatives.

This would enrich Australia's cultural landscape and help the wider public understand caste not merely as discrimination, but as a structure that communities have long resisted through creativity, courage and cultural survival.

13. Data, Funding and Accountability

The absence of consistent data about caste-oppressed communities makes it difficult to design effective cultural policies, funding programs and participation measures.

The same problem exists in cultural policy. Without data, it is difficult to know:

- whether caste-oppressed artists are receiving funding;
- whether caste-oppressed communities are represented in cultural advisory processes;
- whether public cultural funding is concentrated in dominant community organisations;
- whether caste-based barriers are affecting cultural participation;
- whether cultural programming reflects diversity within South Asian communities.

PATCA recommends that the Australian Government work with community organisations, including PATCA, to develop culturally safe and voluntary methods for understanding the cultural participation needs of caste-oppressed communities.

This could include optional, community co-designed self-identification questions, confidential consultation processes, and voluntary reporting mechanisms that allow caste-oppressed communities to identify barriers without being exposed to stigma, retaliation or forced disclosure.

Funding bodies should also publish transparent information about how they support structurally invisibilised communities, including caste-oppressed communities.

14. Alignment with the National Anti-Racism Framework

The National Cultural Policy should align with the Australian Human Rights Commission's National Anti-Racism Framework.

The AHRC has recognised casteism as a form of discrimination that affects cultural rights and operates through interpersonal, institutional and structurally invisibilised forms.

The National Anti-Racism Framework also recommends that the Australian Government investigate legal protections against caste discrimination.⁶

Cultural policy should not sit apart from anti-racism policy. Culture can either challenge racism or reproduce it.

Publicly funded cultural systems therefore have an important role in preventing caste-based exclusion and promoting dignity, belonging and equal participation.

More recently, the NSW Legislative Assembly Committee on Law and Safety's 2026 report, Measures to combat right-wing extremism in New South Wales, recorded evidence from PATCA and other stakeholders that far-right Hindu extremism and caste discrimination are causing harm to communities in NSW.

The Committee noted PATCA's evidence that far-right Hindu extremism can reproduce caste hierarchies, exclude and silence affected communities, and operate through diaspora organisations and networks.

The report also recorded the Australian Human Rights Commission's recommendation that NSW consider caste discrimination as a protected attribute under the Anti-Discrimination Act 1977 (NSW).⁷

This parliamentary consideration reinforces the need for cultural policy to distinguish between Hindu faith and cultural practices, on the one hand, and exclusionary ideologies or representational structures that reproduce caste hierarchy, cultural erasure or community harm, on the other.

⁶ Australian Human Rights Commission. (2024). The National Anti-Racism Framework: A roadmap to eliminating racism in Australia (Report, November 2024). Australian Human Rights Commission. https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-11/NARF_Full_Report_FINAL_DIGITAL_ACCESSIBLE.pdf

⁷ New South Wales Parliament, Committee on Law and Safety. (2026). Measures to combat right-wing extremism in New South Wales: Final report (Report 5/58). Parliament of New South Wales. <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/ladocs/inquiries/3160/Final%20Report%20-%20Measures%20to%20combat%20right-wing%20extremism%20in%20NSW.pdf>

15. Conclusion

PATCA welcomes the Australian Government's commitment to developing the next National Cultural Policy.

This is an important opportunity to ensure that Australia's cultural future reflects not only broad diversity, but justice within diversity.

For caste-oppressed communities, cultural inclusion means more than being counted under broad labels such as "Indian", "Hindu", "Tamil", "South Asian" or "multicultural".

It means being recognised as communities with our own histories, cultural traditions, artistic practices, ancestral memories, foodways, philosophies, spiritual identities and stories.

A National Cultural Policy that promises A Place for Every Story must ensure that caste-oppressed communities are no longer structurally invisible.

PATCA urges the Australian Government to embed caste-inclusive safeguards across cultural policy, funding, infrastructure, public festivals, arts education, creative industries and national storytelling.

By doing so, Australia can build a cultural landscape that truly reflects the dignity, diversity and belonging of all communities — including those whose stories have too often been silenced, marginalised or erased.

16. Selected References

1. *Australian Government, Office for the Arts, Towards a New National Cultural Policy: Public Consultation Paper, 2026.*
2. *Australian Human Rights Commission, National Anti-Racism Framework Scoping Report 2022, 2022.*
3. *Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia, commissioned by the Australian Human Rights Commission, An Anti-Racism Framework: Experiences and Perspectives of Multicultural Australia, 2024.*
4. *Australian Human Rights Commission, The National Anti-Racism Framework: A Roadmap to Eliminating Racism in Australia, 2024.*
5. *Name withheld / Coalition Against Caste Discrimination, Caste Discrimination and Social Exclusion in Australia, Submission 154 to the Department of Home Affairs, Multicultural Framework Review, 2023.*
6. *NSW Legislative Assembly Committee on Law and Safety, Measures to Combat Right-Wing Extremism in New South Wales: Final Report, Report 6/58, April 2026.*
7. *NSW Legislative Assembly Committee on Law and Safety, Transcript — Measures to Combat Right-Wing Extremism in NSW, 18 February 2026, in-camera evidence of Alliance Against Islamophobia and Periyar Ambedkar Thoughts Circle of Australia, resolved for publication with witness names redacted.*