

Periyar Ambedkar Thoughts Circle of Australia

SUBMISSION ON

Modernising and Harmonising Classification Standards

April 2026



PERIYAR AMBEDKAR THOUGHTS CIRCLE OF AUSTRALIA

January 2026

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Submission to

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

Modernising and Harmonising Classification Standards

Submitted by:

Periyar Ambedkar Thoughts Circle of Australia (PATCA)

About PATCA

The Periyar Ambedkar Thoughts Circle of Australia (PATCA) is a grassroots advocacy organisation committed to addressing caste-based discrimination and advancing social justice in Australia.

Inspired by the teachings of Periyar E.V. Ramasamy and Dr B.R. Ambedkar, PATCA works across education, public policy, community safety and human rights to challenge the structural invisibility, exclusion and discrimination experienced by caste-oppressed communities.

PATCA has contributed to national and state-level consultation and reform processes, including submissions to the Australian Human Rights Commission, the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA), the NSW Government's review of the Anti-Discrimination Act 1977, and parliamentary processes concerning education, multiculturalism and social cohesion.

Introduction and PATCA's Core Position

PATCA welcomes the opportunity to make this submission on the proposed modernisation and harmonisation of Australia's classification standards.

PATCA is an advocacy organisation focused on addressing the structural invisibility of caste discrimination and social exclusion experienced by caste-oppressed Hindu communities in Australia.

In May 2024, PATCA convened a series of anti-racism community consultation sessions, including online consultations involving participants from across Australia and an in-person session in Parramatta, Sydney.

These consultations found that caste identity and hierarchy remain deeply entrenched within sections of the Australian South Asian diaspora; that caste-based bullying is occurring in schools; that exclusion and ostracisation occur in workplaces, places of worship and community spaces; and that caste-based social networks can reproduce hierarchy and exclusion in Australia.

Our submission is guided by a simple proposition: classification standards should help Australians identify, understand and avoid harmful discriminatory content, including content that normalises caste hierarchy, dehumanisation, humiliation, exclusion, or violence directed at caste-oppressed communities.

The current reform process expressly aims to make the system more evidence-led, transparent, inclusive and useful in a digital-first environment, with clearer signposting for matters such as sexual violence, suicide and discrimination.

PATCA supports that direction. However, we submit that the reform will be incomplete unless the revised classification framework more clearly recognises discriminatory content that operates through coded hierarchy, humiliation, exclusion, purity and pollution logic, social segregation, or dehumanising portrayals of vulnerable communities.

PATCA does not seek to comment in detail on every proposed technical amendment.

Our primary concern is that the revised guidelines should more clearly identify and communicate discriminatory harm, including caste-coded discrimination, in a way that is principled, evidence-led and practically useful for the public.

Why This Reform Matters for Caste-Oppressed Communities

The Australian Human Rights Commission's National Anti-Racism Framework Scoping Report recognised caste as an intersectional system of discrimination and noted that casteism affects all aspects of life, including housing, services, education, employment, labour, community participation and religious life.

It also observed that casteism can take interpersonal, institutional and structurally invisibilised forms, including verbal, physical and online abuse, threats and assault.

The broader FECCA anti-racism consultations similarly identified caste-based discrimination as a significant problem in Australia.

They recorded that people reported caste identity-based discrimination in the form of physical assault, being treated as untouchables, socio-economic boycott, exclusionary practices in education, employment and marriage, and intersectional discrimination involving gender, religion and caste.

This matters directly to classification reform. Classification standards are not merely technical tools. They are one of the ways in which the classification system helps the public identify harmful content and make informed choices.

If discriminatory content is only recognised when it uses crude slurs or explicit hatred, the framework will miss the ways in which caste-based prejudice is often communicated in practice.

It may instead be conveyed through humiliation, coded superiority, ritualised exclusion, purity and pollution narratives, the normalisation of unequal human worth, or the portrayal of caste-oppressed people as socially inferior.

For caste-oppressed communities, the harm often lies not only in overt abuse, but in the social meaning carried by content that presents hierarchy, exclusion or humiliation as natural, cultural, respectable, humorous or divinely sanctioned.

For example, harm may arise where a film repeatedly presents a caste-oppressed character as comic relief whose humiliation is itself the joke, or where exclusion and social inferiority are normalised as culturally proper.

This issue is not abstract. For many Australians, including South Asian communities in Australia, Indian-language film and streaming content form part of everyday media consumption.

Where such content normalises caste hierarchy, humiliation, dehumanisation, exclusion, or violence directed at caste-oppressed communities, the classification framework should be capable of identifying and communicating that harm clearly and consistently.

The concern is not with Indian cinema as such, but with ensuring that Australia's classification standards can recognise discriminatory harm wherever it appears, including in transnational screen content widely consumed in Australia.

This broader policy context is reinforced by Recommendation 17 of the National Anti-Racism Framework, which calls on the Australian Government to investigate options for legal protections against caste discrimination, including potential reform of existing legislation.

That recommendation further supports the need for Australian regulatory frameworks, including classification standards, to recognise caste-coded harm more clearly.

PATCA's Response to the Proposed Reform Directions

1. Overhaul of the “Themes” classifiable element (C02)

PATCA strongly supports the proposed overhaul of the “Themes” element, particularly the proposal to make it more specific and to include discrimination among the key issues better identified and communicated to audiences.

This is especially important because harmful caste-coded material may not always appear as explicit hate speech. It may instead be embedded within “themes” of culture, religion, social order, family honour, purity, tradition, or social hierarchy. A broad and vague “Themes” category risks obscuring this harm.

PATCA submits that the revised framework should ensure that discrimination-related content advice can identify, where relevant:

- content that normalises caste hierarchy or inequality
- content that humiliates or degrades caste-oppressed persons
- content that depicts or legitimises segregation, untouchability, or exclusion
- content that uses caste-based abuse, threats or dehumanising language
- content that glorifies, excuses or sanitises violence or exclusion directed at vulnerable communities.

PATCA also supports the proposal to move away from vague or overly general use of “Themes” and towards more intelligible content descriptors that better reflect the issues communities are actually concerned about.

This is especially important where discriminatory harm is not incidental, but central to the content’s message or atmosphere.

2. Evidence over morality, and clearer definitions (C03 and C07)

PATCA strongly supports the proposed emphasis on evidence over moral judgement, and the proposal to clarify definitions and thresholds within the guidelines.

This is an especially important shift. Too often, harmful discriminatory material is minimised because it is assessed through a lens of taste, decency, or traditional morality rather than through a lens of likely harm.

Content that reinforces caste hierarchy or dehumanises marginalised communities may be defended as religion, culture, humour, heritage or commentary. But where such content is likely to reinforce prejudice, exclusion or humiliation, that harm should be recognised directly.

PATCA therefore submits that the revised guidelines should define discriminatory content in a way that captures not only explicit slurs, but also coded supremacist narratives, glorification of social hierarchy, depictions of humiliation and exclusion, and other material that normalises the inferior status of a targeted community.

The correct question is not simply whether content is offensive in a moral sense. The correct question is whether it is likely to reinforce harmful beliefs, discriminatory attitudes, or exclusionary conduct in the real world.

For this reason, PATCA recommends that the revised guidelines adopt a harm-based interpretive test that asks:

- whether the content targets a vulnerable or historically marginalised group
- whether the discriminatory messaging is repeated, normalised, glorified or instructional
- whether the material presents exclusion, humiliation or hierarchy as justified or natural
- whether the likely effect of the content is to reinforce stigma, prejudice or unequal human worth.

3. Transparent consumer advice, icons and quick access to reasons (C18, C20 and C21)

PATCA supports proposals to improve transparency in classification decisions, introduce clearer content icons, and improve consumer access to classification reasoning through digital tools such as website reform and quick links.

These reforms would materially assist parents, carers, educators and community members to make informed decisions. In particular, they would be valuable in relation to content involving discrimination, dehumanisation, sexual violence, suicide, or other significant harms.

PATCA recommends that the reformed system include:

- a clear warning or icon for discrimination, hate or dehumanising content
- short, plain-language consumer advice where discriminatory material is present
- accessible online explanations of why a title received its rating, especially where a title contains potentially harmful discriminatory content but remains available to broader audiences.

This would support both transparency and public trust.

In PATCA's view, there is particular value in ensuring that discrimination warnings are not treated as secondary or hidden concerns.

If the classification system is to be genuinely useful, it should help viewers identify not only age suitability, but also the presence of content that may normalise social hierarchy, racialised contempt, or exclusionary attitudes.

4. Community-led oversight and advisory structures (C09)

PATCA supports the proposal for a community-led Classification Advisory Council.

For this measure to have real integrity, the council should include representatives with lived expertise and demonstrated knowledge in anti-racism, caste discrimination, gendered violence, child safety, disability, digital harms, and trauma-informed policy.

It should not be dominated by industry voices or by communities already structurally overrepresented in public institutions.

PATCA submits that meaningful community participation is necessary if the classification framework is to remain responsive to changing forms of harm and to the lived realities of communities affected by racism, dehumanisation and social exclusion.

In particular, PATCA recommends that any advisory structure include members with expertise in:

- caste and descent-based discrimination
- racism and intersectionality
- digital and online hate
- trauma-informed content assessment
- child and youth safety
- the social impacts of dehumanising or exclusionary narratives

5. Public education and media literacy (C22)

PATCA supports a public education campaign to improve understanding of the classification system.

However, this campaign should not be confined to explaining age categories and symbols. It should also help the public understand why discriminatory content matters, how harmful narratives may operate even in coded or normalised forms, and how families and educators can respond to such material in informed and constructive ways.

This is especially important for children and young people, who may encounter caste-discriminatory material without having the conceptual tools to interpret or challenge it.

PATCA therefore recommends that any public education campaign include guidance on:

- how to interpret warnings relating to discrimination and dehumanisation
- how coded or “cultural” content can still carry harmful social meaning
- how parents, carers and teachers can discuss discriminatory material with children and young people
- how the classification system supports informed choice rather than mere restriction.

PATCA's Recommendations

PATCA recommends that the revised classification guidelines and related reform measures:

1. Explicitly recognise discriminatory content as a serious classifiable concern, including content that normalises caste hierarchy, exclusion, humiliation, dehumanisation, segregation, or violence.
2. Ensure that “discrimination” is interpreted broadly enough to capture coded and indirect forms of harmful messaging, not only explicit slurs or overt hate speech.
3. Adopt a harm-based interpretive framework that considers likely real-world effect, including whether the content reinforces prejudice, legitimises exclusion, or normalises unequal human worth.
4. Provide clearer and more visible consumer advice for discriminatory content, including warnings or icons where appropriate.
5. Improve transparency by making short reasons for classification decisions more accessible to the public, especially where content involves significant discriminatory or dehumanising material.
6. Establish advisory structures that include diverse community expertise, including lived expertise of caste-oppressed and other structurally marginalised communities.
7. Develop public education resources that strengthen media literacy in relation to discriminatory content, including for parents, carers, teachers and young people.

Conclusion

PATCA supports the effort to modernise and harmonise Australia's classification standards. We support the move towards a system that is clearer, more evidence-led, more transparent, and more responsive to the realities of a digital-first media environment.

But modernisation will be incomplete if the revised framework does not adequately recognise how discriminatory content operates in practice. For caste-oppressed communities, harm often lies not only in explicit abuse, but in coded hierarchy, demeaning exclusion, dehumanisation and the normalisation of unequal human worth.

The classification system should help Australians see that clearly.

PATCA therefore urges the Department to ensure that the revised classification guidelines treat discriminatory content, including caste-coded discriminatory content, as a serious and visible classifiable issue across films, computer games and publications.

PATCA would be pleased to engage further with the Department as this reform process progresses.