



## About the ABC

# Ombudsman Investigation Report

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## ABC NEWS | Four Corners | Infiltrating Australia | 17 June 2024

### Summary

The Ombudsman's Office received 75 content complaints about the episode of *Four Corners* "[Infiltrating Australia](#)", broadcast on 17 June 2024, and the accompanying [online article](#), published the same day.

The complaints raised concerns relating to the ABC's editorial standards for accuracy and impartiality and diversity of perspectives. Several complaints were primarily focused on audience members' personal preferences, suggesting that the ABC should not be critical of the Indian government or disagreeing with the premise of the program. Decisions about news value and newsgathering (for example, whether to follow up or cover a specific story) are made independently by ABC News and therefore the Ombudsman has not addressed these matters.

The program *Infiltrating Australia* explores the influence of Narendra Modi's government in Australia. It investigates this by first examining Modi's popularity and his low tolerance for criticism. The program then looks at the experience of the ABC's former South Asia correspondent Avani Dias when her Indian visa wasn't renewed ahead of India's 2024 general election. The program analyses political connections to the Indian government in Australia, investigating the local "*nest of spies*" previously disrupted by ASIO and Australian residents who say they have been threatened by India's authorities.

### Analysis

We have considered the complaints with reference to the following editorial standards:

- 2.1 Make reasonable efforts to ensure that material facts are accurate and presented in context.
- 4.1 Gather and present news and information with due impartiality.

## Accuracy

Complaints alleged that the program:

- was inaccurate in how it depicted Narendra Modi's ideology, his party, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the organisation the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS),
- was inaccurate by stating that Modi has *"hardened his stance against minorities, dissidents and freedom of speech"*,
- inaccurately portrayed the Australian Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS),
- inaccurately portrayed the Overseas Friends of the BJP (OFBJP), and
- was inaccurate about the Khalistan movement and the death of Hardip Singh Nijjar.

## Depiction of Modi's ideology, the BJP and RSS

Complaints alleged that it was inaccurate to link Modi, the BJP and RSS with far right ideology by describing RSS as a *"far right paramilitary organisation"*, suggesting it was inspired by Nazism and fascism, and stating that RSS *"rejects secular India"* and *"Modi's pushed Hindu supremacy"*.

Four Corners advised:

*"Far-right can be considered those who seek a homogenous society, have nativism ideologies and are extremely nationalist according to [European Centre for Populism Studies](#). Several researchers also agree RSS is a far right organisation, and others also agree in describing it as a far-right paramilitary organisation (see [US Library of Congress](#) and [Australian Institute of International Affairs](#).)"*

Four Corners advised that the RSS were inspired by Nazism (<https://caravanmagazine.in/history/rss-golwalkar-links-nazism>) and the ideological links between Nazism, fascism and the RSS are corroborated by several researchers (<https://www.justiceforall.org/indiannazis-report/the-nazi-party-is-analogous-to-indias-rss/>).

We note the [RSS website](#) states that *"the RSS believed from day one that this country belonged to the Hindus."*

Dr Priya Chacko, who was an expert interviewed in the program, is an Associate Professor of International Politics at the University of Adelaide and an expert in Indian politics and foreign policy and the Indo-Pacific region. In the program Dr Chacko said that *"The RSS is commonly described as a far right paramilitary organisation. It was formed in the 1920s and it was inspired*

*by German Nazism and Italian fascism.*" Dr Chacko's view was clearly attributed to her, and we are satisfied Dr Chacko is an appropriate subject matter expert whose perspective is worthy of inclusion.

Regarding the statement in the program that *"Modi's pushed Hindu supremacy and ultra nationalism but claims democracy is still strong in India"*. Four Corners provided the Ombudsman's Office with evidence of Modi's words and policies which push Hindu supremacy, including campaigning for religious sites claimed by Muslims to be Hindu ([Ayodhya: India's top court gives Hindus site claimed by Muslims](#)), the [Citizenship Amendment Act](#) (2019), locking down Kashmir ([Kashmir: India's 'draconian' blackout sets worrying precedent, warns UN](#)), the US state department report (<https://time.com/6280298/india-religious-freedom-us-state-department-report/>), love jihadi laws and cow vigilante laws passed in several states ruled by the BJP.

Accordingly, we consider the depiction of Modi's ideology, of BJP and RSS are in keeping with the standards for accuracy.

### **Stating that Modi has *"hardened his stance against minorities, dissidents and freedom of speech"***

The program interviewed Indian journalist Mandeep Punia about his experience of being jailed because of a story he published. It looked at treatment of minorities, noting the BJP has been *"accused of supporting demolitions"*.

*"Minorities like Sikhs and Muslims also say they're being targeted. Modi's party's been accused of supporting demolitions of Muslim homes, and mosques like Shabana's place in north Delhi."*

A complaint alleged this was inaccurate as there was *"no evidence for this claim"* that the demolition happened because the owner was Muslim, and that the BJP was not responsible for the demolition. Complaints also alleged the footage included in this section was misleading as it suggested Hindus were responsible for violence against Muslims without discussing instances of Muslim violence against Hindus.

We note that the program did not state that Modi or his party demolished the homes, but included the allegation that he has *"supported demolitions of Muslim homes"*. The footage of Shabana's home and her perspective on the demolition of her home is relevant to include within the program. *Four Corners* advised the [New York Times has reported](#) on court cases and these claims, as has the [BBC](#). These claims, supported by Shabana's first-hand experience included in the program, are presented as allegations to the audience.

The interview with Mandeep Punia was supported by footage of events relevant to the topic being discussed. This was also presented as his account of his personal experience. The program was not suggesting there was *"one-sided violence"* by Hindus against Muslims, as complaints allege, but was rather discussing how Modi's government responded to criticism.

We are satisfied that this was in keeping with the accuracy standards.

## Depiction of HSS Australia

The program looked at the HSS, described as one of the *"sister Hindu nationalists organisations operating in Australia"*. Former HSS camp instructor, Arjun Nidigallu, who spent years in the organisation was interviewed. He spoke about his own experiences running HSS camps, explaining some of the activities done with children:

*"And they were instructed to shout a slogan repetitively as they played tug of war. Um, and in Hindi it goes like this, it goes Hindustan, Hindu, and which means Hindustan or India belongs to the Hindus. And you've got young kids who, and I knew and I knew these kids, they didn't speak anything but English. And that image just didn't sit well with me."*

Arjun Nidigallu said, *"These organizations have more or less taken a monopoly on what it is to be Hindu you don't hear that the voices of, of those who are secular Hindus."*

The program discussed an Indian martial art, danda, which is part of HSS. The reporter asked, *"this does look a bit like a normal martial arts class. What makes it dangerous?"* It included footage of danda being used in India, explaining *"As you can see in this footage danda is used by Hindu nationalist devotees in deadly riots against Indian Muslims"*. Comment from HSS Australia was included:

*"A spokesperson from HSS Australia told us danda is like other self defence training. They said the organisation does charity work. And that it takes inspiration from the RSS."*

Complaints alleged that it was misleading to draw links between HSS and RSS, and the statements made by Arjun Nidigallu about HSS, particularly about it being a Hindu nationalist movement, were inaccurate. Complaints also alleged it was misleading to make links between danda and violence against Muslims in India.

Four Corners advised:

*"In its response to our question on HSS' links to the RSS, a spokesman said: 'HSS takes inspiration from RSS with respects to character development in serving our local society. We share with them the vision of \*the World is One family\* and to serve the people is akin to serving the divinity.'"*

Arjun Nidigallu's statements about HSS, including that it has *"more or less taken a monopoly on what it is to be Hindu"* were presented as his own perspective within the program. Four Corners advised that this perspective is *"something that has been backed up publicly by other international members of HSS and researchers in this space."*

We consider that the information about HSS Australia was presented in context, including with spokesperson comments, in keeping with the accuracy standards.

## Depiction of the Overseas Friends of the BJP

The program explored the Australian government's relationship with Modi, showing Modi's visit to Sydney at the Qudos Bank Arena. It included a clip from the stadium event of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese stating *"...Prime Minister Modi is the Boss. I want you to give a big Australian welcome to my dear friend Prime Minister Narendra Modi."*

The program stated:

*"Hindu nationalist groups in Australia helped organise this stadium event during Modi's Sydney visit last year. One of the groups is called the Overseas Friends of the BJP."...*

*"Sources have told us the Overseas Friends of the BJP wants to infiltrate politics. It wants to get elected into local council first, then state government and ultimately federal parliament."*

The program investigated *"patterns of the organisation's influence"* in Australian politics, which *"led us here to the Hillshire in the northwest of Sydney, which is also the federal electorate of Mitchell held by Alex Hawke. We've discovered one of Alex Hawke's closest deputies, Rahul Jethi, is a founding member of the Overseas Friends of the BJP in Australia."*

The program showed a clip of Mr Jethi chanting *"J'ai Shri Ram"*. The reporter said *"He's seen here chanting a slogan co-opted by Hindu nationalists and was seen at organisation events with senior Indian Ministers this year."*

Complaints alleged that the suggestion that the OFBJP and the Indian diaspora in Australia were trying to infiltrate Australian politics was inaccurate. They alleged it was inaccurate to suggest *"J'ai Shri Ram"* was a Hindu nationalist slogan and that it misleadingly suggested the OFBJP only supported the Liberal Party.

In relation to the *"Jai Shri Ram"* chant, *Four Corners* has advised:

*"While the slogan Jai Shri Ram is a Hindu faith slogan, it is well known that it is now consistently used by Hindu nationalists as a battle cry. Researchers in this space have also highlighted how the Hindu nationalist party the BJP has used it as a political slogan."*

- [\*Jai Shri Ram: The Hindu chant that became a murder cry\*](#)
- [\*The 3 Most Polarizing Words in India\*](#)
- [\*India Is Starting to See Through Modi's Nationalist Myth\*](#)
- [\*In India, hate-filled songs are a weapon to target Muslims"\*](#)

We observe that the program outlined links between MP Alex Hawke and the OFBJP as an example supporting the allegation that the OFBJP *"wants to infiltrate politics"*. Former NSW Liberal Matthew Camenzuli provided comments on Rahul Jethi's influence. The program presented the links between Mr Hawke and Rahul Jethi as allegations, and included his and Mr Hawke's denials of these allegations providing the audience with the information to make up their own minds.

While the program explored an association between a Liberal MP and the OFBJP, it did not suggest that the OFBJP was only associated with the Liberal Party. This was presented as one example of the organisation's influence in Australian politics. It also depicted Modi's relationship with Australian Prime Minister and Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese, demonstrating that the link to Australian politics is not limited to one party.

We are satisfied that the way the OFBJP was presented in the program was in keeping with the standards for accuracy.

## Depiction of Khalistan movement

The program also looked at the Khalistan movement, which it described as *"a global movement calling for the state of Punjab to break away from India and become a separate Sikh nation called Khalistan."* The program said, *"India's not just accused of covert forms of foreign interference. The most shocking allegations against the Indian government involve assassinating dissidents on foreign soil."* It explored allegations of Indian authorities interfering with the movement in Canada and Australia.

Complaints alleged that the program was inaccurate by omitting information about the Khalistan movement, which would mislead the audience into thinking it was a peaceful movement. They also alleged it was inaccurate by suggesting Hardeep Singh Nijjar was killed in Canada by the Indian government.

We observe that the program did not portray the Khalistan movement as peaceful. It outlined the Indian government's position that the Khalistan movement is a terror threat and accusations of violence:

*"The Indian Government has justified cracking down on the Khalistan movement, because it sees it as a terror threat. It points to the 80s and 90s when the movement turned into an armed militancy and an Air India flight was bombed, killing more than 300 people. The Sikh bodyguards who assassinated the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984 were incensed by her decision to order the Indian military to storm Sikhism's holiest site."*

The reporter also challenged Khalistan leaders, including Gurpatwant Pannun, global leader of Sikhs for Justice, on their threats of violence. This was included in the program.

The program explained:

*"Last year, Moninder's close friend Hardeep Singh Nijjar was shot dead outside their local temple in Vancouver. Canada has accused the Indian Government of orchestrating the assassination. The Modi administration denies it, and has accused Nijjar of being a terrorist."*

This presents the allegations of Indian involvement in Nijjar's death as an allegation from the Canadian government, and includes the Indian government's denial, in keeping with the accuracy standards. The program also discussed the US government indictment which supports

the Canadian government's allegations (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/11/29/india-us-assassination-plot-sikh-pannun/>).

We are satisfied that the way the program discussed the Khalistan movement was materially accurate in the context.

## **Naming India as responsible for the "nest of spies"**

Complaints noted that ASIO had never identified the *"nest of spies"* as Indian operatives.

The program outlined how in 2021, Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) chief Mike Burgess said ASIO had investigated a *"nest of spies"*. The program included, *"Burgess didn't name the country. But the Washington Post did,"* and explained they were Indian spies.

The identification of the spies as Indian was already in the public domain, by the Washington Post, and the program attributed this identification to the Washington Post. It was also clear to the audience that ASIO had not identified the country.

We are satisfied that was appropriately attributed, in keeping with the accuracy standards.

## **Impartiality and diversity of perspectives**

Complaints alleged the program lacked impartiality, arguing that it was biased against the Modi government, promoted anti-Hindu sentiment, and did not contain a diversity of perspectives.

While the ABC should on all occasions be fair, accurate and open-minded it is not required to deliver equal treatment or equal time to all perspectives on all occasions. There can be good reasons to favour or highlight certain viewpoints, analyses or opinions in particular stories or programs.

In this program, the newsworthy focus was on the infiltration of the Indian government in Australia. The program included key principle perspectives relevant to this focus. It discussed Modi's popularity and the successes of his government, showing Modi's stadium visit in Sydney and noting that Modi *"claims democracy is still strong in India"*.

Interviewees were challenged on their positions through questions put to them by the reporter, for example, Greens Senator David Shoebridge, while critiquing Australia's close relationship with India, was asked *"Isn't it fair though that Australia is pursuing this relationship with India considering it's becoming such an economic and technological powerhouse?"*

The program included comments from an HSS spokesperson and included an interview with a representative from the Overseas Friends of the BJP. He explained that the group was a fan group, a community group that is part of the Indian diaspora and a non-profit organisation.

The allegations in the program were directed toward the Indian government and the organisations in Australia such as HSS and OFBJP which support it. It did not contain allegations about the Indian diaspora or Hindus generally. It distinguished between the political activities of

groups like HSS and the OFBJP from Hinduism, by including the perspective of former BJP supporter and community leader in Sydney Yadu Singh:

*"I'm a Hindu. I'm a practising Hindu, but Hindu who does not discriminate or hate anybody else... I think it's important. I believe in Hindu, uh, Hinduism or Hindu dharma."*

Regarding the allegations of threats of violence being made against the Indian diaspora in Australia, the reporter said:

*"The Indian Government didn't get back to our requests for a response. Australian ministers declined an interview. In a statement, a spokesperson said the Government is deeply concerned by these allegations. They said the government doesn't tolerate threats of violence."*

While we understand some complainants did not agree with the criticisms of the Indian government made within the program, the ABC has a duty to report without fear or favour, even where that may be uncomfortable. We are satisfied that the perspectives included in the program were relevant to its focus and the program was duly impartial, in keeping with the standards.

## Ombudsman's Office Finding

The program did not breach the ABC's editorial standards for accuracy and impartiality and diversity of perspectives.

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