From valuing tolerance to practising it: Persian literature and living with difference in multicultural Australia

Insights from the Persian Literature and Tolerance workshop series

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Prepared by

Dr Najmeh Hassanli – University of Technology Sydney
Dr Gelareh Holden – Kaplan Business School

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Ethics approval and participant confidentiality
Ethics approval for the research was obtained from the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Human Research Ethics Committee [HE-2026-0252], and the research was conducted in accordance with the approved protocol.

Participant quotations have been translated from Persian into English and lightly edited for readability while preserving their meaning. Participant identifiers (P01–P10) are used throughout the report in place of participants' names.

Use of AI-assisted tools
AI-assisted tools were used to support the organisation and presentation of information in preparing this report. The analysis, interpretation and conclusions remain the responsibility of the authors.

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Executive summary

What does it mean to practise tolerance when disagreement becomes deeply personal?

This question became unexpectedly immediate during a six-session, face-to-face workshop series developed and delivered by the Adelaide Community for Persian Literature Inc. (ACPL) in Adelaide in 2026, exploring *ravadari* (tolerance) through Persian literature. The workshop series invited members of the Australian-Iranian community to consider difference, coexistence and human relationships through poetry, literature and cultural texts. As the program unfolded, escalating events relating to Iran intensified divisions within the community and brought these questions into participants' everyday lives.

Ten research interviews conducted in June and July 2026 revealed no simple story of participants becoming “more tolerant”. Instead, participants described a deeper understanding of tolerance as the capacity to listen, reflect and remain engaged when disagreement persists. Persian literature offered a culturally meaningful way into these conversations, while the sessions created opportunities to encounter different perspectives and practise responding to them.

The clearest reported effects were greater awareness, reflection and perspective-taking rather than wholesale changes in beliefs. Skilled facilitation was central, and participants repeatedly stressed that tolerance requires repeated practice and continuity.

Seven findings

1. Tolerance means engaging with difference, not eliminating disagreement.
2. Cultural values do not automatically translate into tolerant practice.
3. Persian literature provided a familiar way to explore difference.
4. The workshop series created a space to practise difference.
5. Change appeared more in responses than beliefs.
6. Tolerance requires practice, and practice requires continuity.
7. Tolerance becomes harder when disagreement becomes personal.

Implications for community-based programming

The findings suggest that programs seeking to support constructive engagement across difference can benefit from culturally meaningful content, structured opportunities for dialogue, skilled facilitation, and continuity that allows for repeated reflection and practice.

These lessons also speak to wider questions of social cohesion in multicultural Australia. Cohesive communities are not necessarily communities without disagreement. Rather, social cohesion may depend partly on people's capacity to live with difference without allowing disagreement to become hostility, exclusion or disconnection.

1. Introduction: Why tolerance, why now?

Australia's cultural diversity is one of its defining features, but sustaining a multicultural society involves more than living alongside difference. It also requires the capacity to navigate disagreement while maintaining relationships and belonging. Recent Australian research points to the resilience of social cohesion despite continuing pressures from national and global events, alongside persistent discrimination and challenges to belonging and intercultural harmony (O'Donnell et al., 2025[1]).

These pressures can be particularly acute within diaspora communities, where political conflicts elsewhere can reverberate through relationships and community life in Australia. Participants interviewed for this report described growing political polarisation within parts of the Australian-Iranian community, including strained friendships, labelling, reluctance to express particular views and withdrawal from spaces where opposing perspectives might be encountered. Their accounts suggest that the challenge was not disagreement itself, but remaining engaged when differences became deeply felt and connected to identity and deeply held beliefs.

The Persian Literature and Tolerance workshop series was conceived before these tensions escalated, around a broader cultural question: what might Persian literary and cultural traditions teach us about *ravadari* - tolerance, acceptance and living with difference? Its timing gave this question unexpected immediacy, as ideas explored through literature and cultural texts were simultaneously being tested in participants' relationships and community lives. The sessions thus provided an opportunity to consider what tolerance might require in practice, within the Australian-Iranian community and more broadly in multicultural Australia.

The workshop series was not designed as a formal social cohesion intervention, and this report does not seek to determine whether it "made people more tolerant" or claim that it increased social cohesion or reduced polarisation. Instead, it asks: *What can participants' experiences tell us about the kinds of community spaces and practices that may help people engage constructively with difference before disagreement becomes disconnection?*

Through participants' experiences of this culturally grounded initiative, the report identifies lessons for community-based programming and contributes to wider discussions about navigating difference and disagreement in multicultural Australia.

2. About the initiative

The Persian Literature and Tolerance workshop series was developed and delivered by the Adelaide Community for Persian Literature Inc. (ACPL). It comprised six face-to-face sessions held in Adelaide in 2026, exploring *ravadari* through Persian literature, poetry and related cultural and historical texts. The series drew on literary works and cultural material grounded in Persian cultural traditions.

The sessions were facilitated by a professor of Persian literature with extensive experience in teaching, literary scholarship and facilitating community-based discussion. Drawing on his literary, cultural and historical knowledge, the facilitator guided participants through selected texts and encouraged discussion about their relevance to contemporary questions of tolerance, difference and coexistence. As the

[1] O'Donnell, J., Falkiner, A., & Szachna, K. (2025). *Mapping Social Cohesion 2025: Social connections through troubled times*. Scanlon Foundation Research Institute. https://scanloninstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/SI0001_MappingSocialCohesion_2025_v6.pdf

findings later show, both his expertise and approach to facilitation were important to participants' experiences of the series.

Literary texts, stories and historical examples provided starting points for exploring difference, judgement, coexistence and disagreement. The workshop series therefore brought together two interconnected forms of engagement:

- engaging with difference through literature; and
- engaging with difference through one another.

As participants interpreted and discussed the material together, different perspectives entered the room. This became particularly significant as political tensions relating to Iran intensified over the course of the series, bringing questions of *ravadari* into participants' relationships and community lives.

3. Purpose of the report

This report seeks to understand participants' experiences of the workshop series and identify broader lessons for community-based programming. It was guided by five broad questions:

- How did participants understand and make sense of *ravadari*?
- What did participants perceive they gained from the workshop series?
- How did Persian literature, facilitation and interaction with others shape their experiences?
- What enabled or constrained constructive engagement with difference?
- What lessons can inform future community-based programs?

The report also considers what participants' experiences may contribute to wider discussions of social cohesion in multicultural Australia. It does not claim that the workshop series increased social cohesion or reduced polarisation.

4. Research approach

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted in June and July 2026. The interviews explored participants' understandings of *ravadari*, their experiences of the workshop series, the role of Persian literature, interactions with other participants, the wider political context, perceived changes, and reflections on future community-based programming.

The interviews were conducted in Persian and analysed thematically. The analysis involved identifying and interpreting recurring patterns across participants' accounts while also attending to differences in their experiences and perspectives. Particular care was taken not to assume that participation in the workshop series resulted in changes in attitudes or behaviour; instead, the analysis examined the forms of influence participants themselves described and the limits they identified.

Political and social context

The workshop series coincided with escalating political tensions relating to Iran, which shaped both participants' experiences of the series and the context in which the research was conducted. Participants described heightened emotions, strained relationships, self-censorship and increasingly entrenched positions within parts of the Australian-Iranian community.

5. Key findings: From cultural values to the practice of living with difference

Participants did not tell a simple story of attending a workshop series, learning about tolerance and leaving with changed attitudes. Some already considered themselves tolerant and described the workshops as reinforcing existing values. Others identified moments when something they encountered made them pause, reconsider an assumption or respond differently to disagreement.

A broader story emerged through these different experiences. Participants recognised tolerance as an important value within Persian cultural and literary traditions, while also confronting how difficult it could be to practise in everyday community life. Persian literature provided a familiar way into this tension, while the workshop series brought participants into contact with different perspectives. As political events relating to Iran intensified, these questions of difference and disagreement became increasingly immediate and emotionally charged.

What emerged was an understanding of *ravadari* not simply as a cultural value or intellectual principle, but as a practice: something that has to be lived and negotiated in relation to others.

Finding 1. Tolerance means engaging with difference, not eliminating disagreement

For some participants, the sessions prompted a reconsideration of what *ravadari* means in practice. P02, for example, distinguished *ravadari* from *tahammol*, which they understood more as enduring or putting up with another person. In their account, *tahammol* leaves the decision with the person doing the tolerating, whereas *ravadari* begins with recognising the other person's right to hold a different view:

> *With tolerance, it is as though I have the right to tolerate you or not... But ravadari was very interesting to me because it is not my right; it is the other person's right.* (P02)

This understanding shifted the emphasis from simply tolerating another person to recognising their right to think differently. P04 arrived at a similar understanding:

> *Tolerance is accepting that not everyone thinks like us... It doesn't mean that I have to accept that you are thinking correctly. It means that I accept that, as another human being, you can have an opinion different from mine*. (P04)

Participants did not suggest that tolerance meant abandoning strongly held political, ethical or social positions, or regarding every position as equally acceptable. Rather, it meant recognising difference, listening before judging and resisting the impulse to immediately correct, dismiss or exclude someone because they saw the world differently.

This became particularly important when participants reflected on political disagreement within the Australian-Iranian community. Several described situations in which disagreement had become personal: people were labelled according to assumed political positions, judged before their views were fully heard, and relationships became difficult to maintain.

The challenge, then, was not simply that people disagreed, but whether they could remain in conversation when disagreement persisted.

Finding 2. Cultural values do not automatically translate into tolerant practice

Participants spoke with pride about Persian literary and cultural traditions and their longstanding attention to humanity, coexistence and respect for others. Yet their accounts also revealed a tension between the presence of these ideas within Persian cultural and literary traditions and how readily they were practised in everyday relationships.

P01 reflected directly on this gap:

> *Persian literature is full of advice and ideas about tolerance and accepting opposing views... Unfortunately, in practice people pay less attention to these things, or they forget them.* (P01)

For some participants, the ideas explored in the workshop series were therefore not new. The value lay partly in bringing familiar principles back into view and asking what they might mean in practice. As another participant put it:

> *We may already know a concept from our culture or literature, but if we don't live with it, it has no effect on our behaviour. We have to grapple with it every day until it becomes part of us.* (P07)

Participants also valued opportunities to question and reinterpret their cultural inheritance rather than simply celebrate it. For some, these reflections extended beyond relationships within the Australian-Iranian community to questions about living with cultural and social difference in multicultural Australia.

The value of engaging with Persian cultural traditions therefore lay not only in preserving heritage, but in reconsidering what that heritage might mean for contemporary life.

Finding 3. Persian literature provided a familiar way to explore difference

Persian literature played a distinctive role because it was already familiar and meaningful to many participants. As one participant explained:

> *From childhood we are intertwined with poetry, from the schoolbooks, to the lullabies our mothers sang to us, to putting Hafez on the Haft-Seen table... Even if we don't continue with it, we have been exposed to it.* (P04)

Questions about tolerance, judgement and coexistence were therefore encountered through cultural material participants already recognised, rather than solely as abstract principles. Familiar verses could also acquire new meaning when contextualised, discussed and interpreted differently by others.

For P07, encountering these ideas within Persian literary traditions gave them particular resonance:

> *Literature makes you look at things more broadly... When we see that Rumi or Saadi or one of the great figures of our own culture has said something, we accept it more easily. We feel that it has come from within our own culture.* (P07)

Literature also provided some distance from immediate political positions. A poem, story or historical example could become a starting point for exploring difficult contemporary questions.

Persian literature therefore functioned not simply as content, but as a shared cultural resource and a pathway into reflection and dialogue.

Finding 4. The workshop series created a space to practise difference

As participants discussed literary ideas with one another, difference entered the room. They heard perspectives and interpretations they did not necessarily agree with, meaning that *ravadari* sometimes had to be practised rather than simply discussed.

P01 valued this openness:

> *There wasn't a sense that someone couldn't speak. Everyone put forward their views and opinions* (P01).

Other participants described discussions becoming “softer” over time, with less tension and greater willingness to hear one another, although they also emphasised that there was still a long way to go. During an intensely difficult political period, P05 described the workshop series as an “oasis in the desert” - a temporary space of respite amid wider conflict and distress.

Participants' accounts also made clear that bringing people together was not enough. Facilitation mattered. They valued the facilitator's literary expertise and credibility, as well as the ability to manage emotionally charged exchanges, avoid imposing a position and protect participants' dignity.

There was nevertheless a tension between openness and structure. Some participants wanted more discussion because disagreement itself provided an opportunity to practise *ravadari*; others worried that political or religious discussion could overwhelm the literary focus. Creating space for difference therefore mattered, but so did how that space was facilitated.

Finding 5. Change appeared more in responses than beliefs

Participants were generally cautious about claiming that the workshop series had transformed them. P01, for example, described the sessions primarily as reinforcing an existing disposition towards tolerance and did not observe a clear overall change among the group during the short series. Others suggested that learning may accumulate over time, making any change difficult to attribute to a single workshop series. The interviews therefore do not support a claim that participation uniformly changed attitudes or behaviour.

Yet when participants described particular experiences, a more subtle pattern appeared. One participant spoke about approaching disagreements with their daughters differently. Rather than responding immediately, they first considered how the situation might look from their perspective. They summarised the shift simply: “less talkative, but more thoughtful”.

Another described hearing a view they considered completely wrong. Their initial reaction remained, but another thought followed: provided the person had not crossed a fundamental ethical boundary, they had a right to think differently. The workshop series had not “completely changed” them, but it had given them a reason to pause.

Across the interviews, similar moments appeared: listening before judging, considering what experiences might have shaped another person's view, recognising that one's own understanding may be partial, and becoming more conscious of one's immediate response.

The clearest evidence of influence therefore lay not in participants adopting different beliefs, but in the little more space some described between encountering difference and responding to it - a moment to pause, consider another perspective and respond more thoughtfully.

These moments were not experienced by every participant, nor can the interviews establish whether they consistently translated into changed behaviour. They do, however, point to the more modest and reflective forms of influence that some participants associated with the workshop series.

Finding 6. Tolerance requires practice, and practice requires continuity

Participants consistently emphasised that meaningful change takes time and repeated practice. One participant illustrated this by comparing tolerance to an everyday skill:

> *It's like cooking. When you cook every day, gradually you become more skilled... Tolerance is the same. It is repetition and practice that makes you proficient.* (P07)

Another participant expressed the point even more directly:

> *Practice is necessary for any kind of learning. Without practice, it is just words.* (P08)

Participants spoke about beginning with ordinary disagreements, with children, partners, friends and others around them, rather than expecting to navigate highly charged differences without practice.

Expecting six sessions to produce substantial behavioural change would be unrealistic. A short series can introduce ideas and create opportunities for reflection and dialogue, but participants' calls for continued or follow-up opportunities reflected their belief that tolerance develops through repeated practice.

Finding 7. Tolerance becomes harder when disagreement becomes personal

Participants' accounts showed that *ravadari* became considerably more difficult to practise when disagreement was closely connected to identity, politics and homeland. This became particularly visible as political tensions relating to Iran intensified during the workshop series and entered participants' friendships, social gatherings and community relationships.

Several described situations in which disagreement became personal. People could be labelled according to assumed political positions, become reluctant to express their views or withdraw from conversations and spaces where they anticipated judgement or confrontation.

The changing political context also shaped what happened within the sessions. One participant described it as a “double-edged sword”:

> *On the one hand, it made the discussions much deeper... But on the other hand, it caused some participants to censor themselves because they did not want to be judged.* (P10)

In this sense, the political context brought the ideas explored through the workshop series into participants' everyday lives. It gave *ravadari* greater immediacy, while also revealing how much harder it could be to practise when emotions were heightened and positions had become deeply held.

Participants did not suggest that six sessions could resolve entrenched political divisions. Some questioned how much dialogue could achieve once positions had hardened and emphasised the importance of creating opportunities for dialogue and engagement earlier, before divisions become deeply entrenched.

6. Implications for community-based programming

The findings extend beyond this particular initiative. They point to broader considerations for community organisations and others developing programs that seek to strengthen dialogue, relationships and constructive engagement across difference.

Rather than providing a model to be replicated, the Persian Literature and Tolerance workshop series highlights several principles that may inform community-based programming in culturally diverse settings.

6.1 Create opportunities to practise difference

Awareness of tolerance does not necessarily prepare people to navigate disagreement when it becomes personal or emotionally charged. Programs can create opportunities for participants to encounter different perspectives, reflect on their own responses and practise remaining engaged when agreement is not possible.

6.2 Draw on culturally meaningful resources

Persian literature provided a familiar and meaningful entry point in this initiative. Other programs might similarly draw on literature, storytelling, art, music, faith traditions, oral histories or other cultural resources to open conversations about difficult contemporary issues.

6.3 Create structured spaces for disagreement

Bringing people together does not automatically produce constructive dialogue. Programs need enough openness for different perspectives to be heard, alongside expectations and boundaries that help prevent disagreement from becoming personal conflict or withdrawal.

6.4 Invest in skilled facilitation

Programs addressing sensitive or contested issues need more than strong content. Facilitators also need to manage competing perspectives and emotions, protect participants' dignity and create space for disagreement without imposing their own position.

6.5 Allow time for relational capacities to develop

Listening, perspective-taking and constructive disagreement develop through repeated practice. Where programs seek to strengthen these capacities, continuity and repeated interaction may be more valuable than one-off interventions.

6.6 Engage before divisions become entrenched

Participants' reflections point to the value of creating opportunities for dialogue before positions become deeply entrenched. Youth and intergenerational programs may be particularly valuable, providing opportunities to explore cultural identity, belonging and understandings of difference across generations.

6.7 Build learning into program design

Follow-up with participants can reveal what they remember, what ideas resurface in everyday life and where programs have had limited influence. This can strengthen future programming and provide more meaningful evidence than attendance or immediate satisfaction alone.

7. Broader implications for social cohesion in multicultural Australia

The initiative was not designed as a social cohesion intervention, and this report does not demonstrate that it increased social cohesion or reduced polarisation. Participants' experiences nevertheless offer broader insights into what living with difference can require in a multicultural society.

Social cohesion does not require consensus

Participants' accounts suggest that disagreement itself is not necessarily the problem. The greater challenge arises when disagreement becomes labelling, hostility, withdrawal or broken relationships. Social cohesion may therefore depend less on achieving agreement than on people's capacity to remain connected across difference.

Dialogue can support the social infrastructure of diverse communities

Participants' experiences also point to the value of spaces where people can encounter different perspectives and maintain dialogue across disagreement. Alongside laws, institutions and multicultural policy, opportunities for dialogue and relationship-building can form part of the everyday social infrastructure that supports coexistence.

The broader lesson is that living with diversity requires not only acceptance of difference, but the capacity to navigate disagreement without allowing it to become disconnection.

8. Conclusion

The Persian Literature and Tolerance workshop series began with an exploration of *ravadari* through Persian literature. Participants' experiences revealed the distance that can exist between valuing tolerance and practising it, particularly when disagreement touches identity, politics and homeland.

Six sessions could not close that distance. They did, however, create opportunities to encounter different perspectives, reflect on one's own responses and, for some participants, pause and respond differently when disagreement arose.

Perhaps the clearest message from participants was also the simplest: tolerance requires practice.

For multicultural Australia, this offers a modest but important insight. Living well with difference does not require the absence of disagreement. It requires the capacity to remain connected when agreement is not possible.