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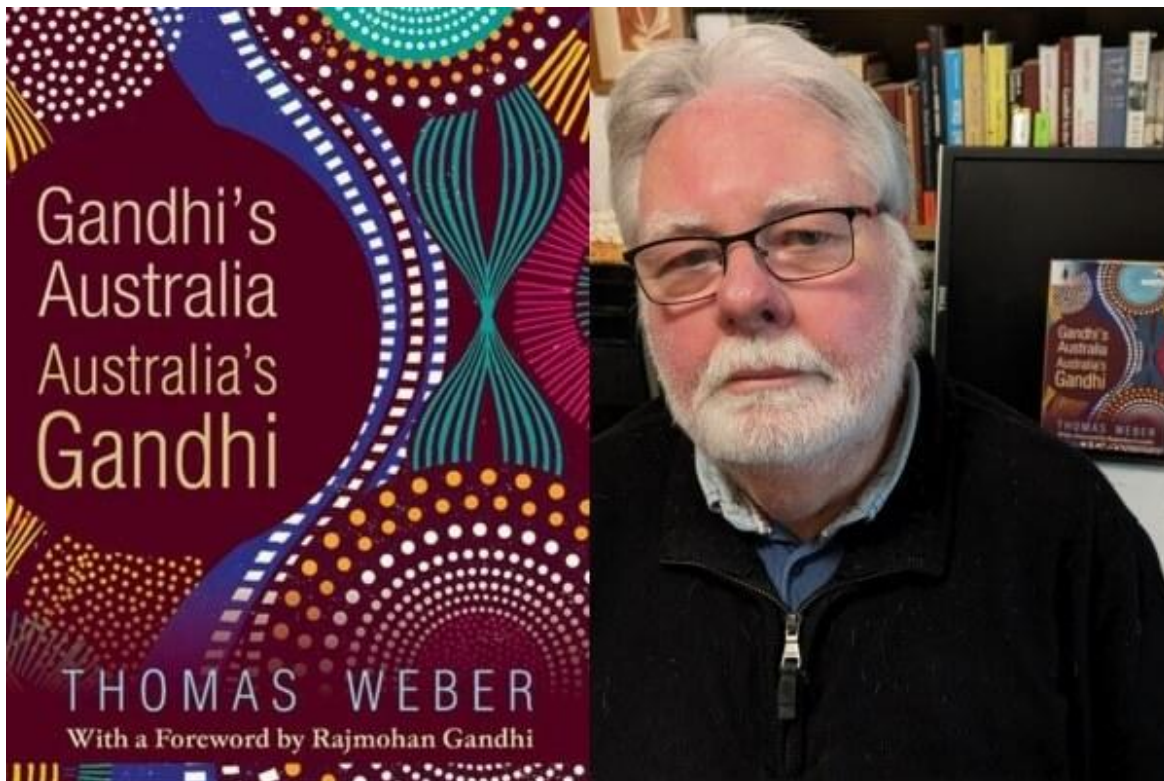
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Prutha Chakraborty - May 31, 2024

# What Gandhi thought of Australia

*... and what it thought of him, in Australian writer Thomas Weber's new book.*



Reading Time: 4 minutes

In 1896, when Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was working for the cause of his countrymen in South Africa, he first referenced Australia in his writings. And it was not in a positive light.

In August of that year, Gandhi published a document titled 'The Grievances of the British Indians in South Africa: An Appeal to the Indian Public'. It included a critical observation: "In Australia, they are endeavouring to pass laws to restrict the influx of Indians in those parts."

Gandhi also communicated this concern to his political mentor, GK Gokhale, noting the possibility of such restrictive legislation receiving "Royal sanction".

In a new book, *Gandhi's Australia, Australia's Gandhi*, author Thomas Weber examines such connections between the revered Indian leader and the "White Australia" of his times.

"Quite a lot has been written about Gandhi and his relationship with Britain and America," Weber begins to tell us why he wrote the book, which is published by [Orient Blackswan](#). "Australians tended to follow the attitudes of the British as most still saw themselves as patriotic members of the Empire. However, I wondered whether there was more going on in Australia than the mere parroting of British concerns."

This set the ball rolling for Weber, who waded through tens of thousands of newspaper entries about Gandhi in the Australian press during his lifetime. The result is this fascinating book, which takes readers on a journey examining Gandhi's perceptions of Australia and the ways in which Australians came to understand him.

### **Gandhi's Australia**

During his time in South Africa, Gandhi fought for the rights of Indians to obtain the benefits of full citizenship. Not many know this, but it was also during this period that the young Gandhi shaped his views on Australia.

"He saw that the racist South African colonies were taking lessons from the then even more racist 'White Australia' that he criticises firmly in his writings," Weber explains.

So, how did Australians perceive Gandhi back then, we ask.

"Australian attitudes to Gandhi tended to reflect those of Britain – the 'Mother Country'," Weber tells *Indian Link*. "When he was leading civil disobedience campaigns against the British, he was vilified. But when he was doing constructive social work, the British praised him and this was reflected in the Australian press."

Interestingly, the Australians who visited Gandhi in India or in London tended to come away with very positive attitudes towards the Mahatma, often noting the unwarranted bias of the press.

Weber's book also covers Gandhi's influences on various movements in Australia, such as peace, environmentalism, religious tolerance, and aid. It focusses on several protests and social justice movements that clearly referenced Gandhi and Gandhian techniques.

"The [Melbourne Rainforest Action Group](#), which did much to highlight the destruction of Asian rainforests by shipping timber from there to Australia, may be a key example," adds Weber, who is an Honorary Associate, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, La Trobe University, Melbourne.

### **Gandhi, The Guiding Light**

The Melbourne-based Weber has previously [written](#): *On the Salt March* (1997), *Gandhi as Disciple and Mentor* (2004), *Gandhi, Gandhism and the Gandhians* (2006) and *Mentor and Going Native: Gandhi's Relationship with Western Women* (2011).

“During my years of thinking and writing about Gandhi, I have visited India at least a dozen times, totalling something like three years at Gandhian institutions, libraries with substantial Gandhian resources, and in the company of Gandhians,” he writes in his latest, *Gandhi’s Australia, Australia’s Gandhi*.

While researching for this book, in particular, Weber made two significant discoveries related to Gandhi and Australia.

Firstly, Australians who visited Gandhi reported positively about him.

“Secondly, the relatively few books written by Australians about Gandhi were not limited to the general biographies that one could expect, but in many cases were substantial additions to the literature,” Weber reveals. “The scholars of Australia have been punching above their weight.”

This year marked the 76th death anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. Weber feels that the world, not just Australia, seems to have currently turned its back on Gandhi’s legacy.

“There is little talk of nonviolence or simple living at the moment,” he shares. “But Gandhi’s legacy is for the ages, and I am sure that if we are to have sustainable and more equitable future, things will turn again and his relevance will sometime again be seen as an important guidepost.”

And therefore, this writer feels, Weber’s book *Gandhi’s Australia, Australia’s Gandhi* has come at the right time to help the diaspora in Australia understand more about Gandhi’s contributions.

“Indians are now one of the, if not the, largest migrant groups in Australia. I think that the biggest impact of the book may be its potential as something of a bridge between India and Australia,” Weber says.

“Many Indian parents who have children born in Australia are anxious to ensure that their culture and heritage are passed on to their offspring. For this reason, they organise Hindi language and Indian dance classes, they celebrate Holi and other festivals and organise functions on the Mahatma’s birth and death days. This book may be part of this process and may provide knowledge for those in India contemplating relocation to Australia.”



## Prutha Chakraborty

Prutha Bhosle Chakraborty is a freelance journalist. With over nine years of experience in different Indian newsrooms, she has worked both as a reporter and a copy editor. She writes on community, health, food and culture. She has widely covered the Indian diaspora, the expat community, embassies and consulates. Prutha is an alumna of the Indian Institute of Journalism and New Media, Bengaluru.