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Global Gandhi: How the Mahatma captured the world's imagination

Gandhi scholar Thomas Weber's new work examines Mahatma's perceptions of Australia and the ways in which Australians came to understand him

GN Bureau | May 21, 2024

#Tolstoy #Australia #Mahatma Gandhi #History



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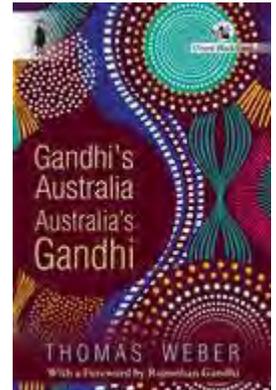
Gandhi's Australia, Australia's Gandhi

By Thomas Weber

Orient BlackSwan, 348 pages

Gandhi's importance in the Western world and his interaction with foreign visitors have been well-documented. However, most of these accounts have focused on Britain and the United States. Today, as India's diaspora grows in numbers and influence, the inspiration of Gandhi in other parts of the world needs to be understood. This is particularly true of Australia.

In 'Gandhi's Australia, Australia's Gandhi', well-known Gandhi scholar Thomas Weber takes readers on a journey examining Gandhi's perceptions of Australia and the ways in which Australians came to understand him. Through meticulous research, Weber details Gandhi's portrayal in Australia from his days in South Africa to the 'freedom rides' of indigenous Australians in the 1960s. He explains how his philosophy and teachings influenced Australian peace, environmental, religious, and aid movements.



Weber is an Honorary Associate, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, La Trobe University, Melbourne. He is the author of 'On the Salt March', 'Gandhi as Disciple and Mentor' and 'Going Native: Gandhi's Relationship with Western Women'.

Here is an excerpt from the book:

The Mahatma and the World

Around 1909, Gandhi undertook a campaign of self-promotion. In that year the Reverend Joseph Doke, an English Baptist minister who was one of Gandhi's close friends during his middle period in South Africa, became Gandhi's first biographer. That biography, titled *M. K. Gandhi: An Indian Patriot in South Africa*, seems to have been more or less dictated by Gandhi to the writer, and it was Gandhi himself who arranged for its publication. As soon as he had a printed copy, he sent it to the great Russian writer and pacifist, Count Leo Tolstoy. Gandhi had confessed that Tolstoy's book, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, overwhelmed him and left an abiding impression on him. Gandhi then conducted a brief correspondence with Tolstoy, in the last months of the writer's life. Gandhi asked Tolstoy to publicise his campaign in South Africa, while using Tolstoy's name to legitimise it.

In November 1909, on a return trip from England to South Africa, Gandhi wrote his seminal political text, *Hind Swaraj*. In December, it was published in two instalments in the Gujarati section of his newspaper, *Indian Opinion*. In March of the following year it appeared in book form, in English translation, as *Indian Home Rule*. In May, Tolstoy received the thin volume that Gandhi had sent him and read it 'with great interest'. However, he was ailing and could do little to publicise the book. Half a year later, Tolstoy was dead and *Hind Swaraj* was banned in India. There was little international reaction to the book, and it would be another ten years before Gandhi and his writings became widely known.

Gandhi came to the attention of the world outside India with his first major campaign for Indian independence from the British Raj, the Non-Cooperation movement of 1920–1921. However, in Australia he did not have a champion such as the New York pastor John Haynes Holmes who, on 10 April 1921, preached his famous sermon, 'Who is the Greatest Man in the World Today?' Many expected Holmes to speak about Lenin; instead, he introduced an almost unknown Mahatma to American audiences. And

Gandhi later declared his debt to Holmes and Americans in general:

“I am not unknown to you. I have in America perhaps the largest number of friends in the West—not even excepting Great Britain, British friends knowing me personally are more discerning than the American. In America I suffer from the well-known malady called hero worship. The good Dr. Holmes, until recently of the Unity Church of New York, without knowing me personally became my advertising agent. Some of the nice things he said about me I never knew myself. So I receive often embarrassing letters from America expecting me to perform miracles. Dr. Holmes was followed much later by the late Bishop Fisher who knew me personally in India. He very nearly dragged me to America but fate had ordained otherwise and I could not visit your vast and great country with its wonderful people.”

The book ‘Mahatma Gandhi: The Man Who Became One with the Universal Being’, by the French Nobel Prize-winning pacifist writer Romain Rolland, did for Europe what Holmes’ sermon did for America. In the 1924 English version of Rolland’s book, Gandhi comes across as more than a nationalist fighter. He is portrayed ‘in the context of man’s search for permanent peace’ and is compared, amongst others, to Saint Francis of Assisi. Even more impressively, after spelling out Gandhi’s message of strength, self-sacrifice, and nonviolence, in the concluding pages of the book Rolland notes that ‘the only thing lacking is the cross’. As early as mid-March 1924, Rolland recorded in his diary that the book ‘has now been published in nearly all languages; editions are following hard on each other’s heels in France and Germany’, and that ‘it is making a deep impression in the religious world, particularly among Protestants. It reawakens the sleeping Christ in them. The Mahatma himself almost seems Christ reborn.’ Some years later, Gandhi admitted that ‘All the reputation that I enjoy in the West is borrowed from him [Rolland]’.

Gandhi’s own Autobiography, originally published as instalments in his paper ‘Young India’, finally appeared in book form in two volumes. They came out in 1927 and 1929 (and appeared in a single volume in 1940). In Indian terms, the book was a bestseller; however, it only detailed Gandhi’s life up to 1921, before the campaign that first brought him to international attention. The ending was abrupt, and Gandhi’s great Salt Satyagraha campaign and international renown were still in the future. However, Gandhi stated that the time had come ‘to bring these chapters to a close’.

He added that his life, from then onwards, ‘has been so public that there is hardly anything about it that people do not know’. As soon as he could after the chapters appeared in Young India, Holmes serialised them in his weekly paper Unity. And in the year of the Salt March, Holmes wrote the Foreword to C. F. Andrews’ edited version of Gandhi’s Autobiography. The English reverend Andrews was a very close lifelong friend of Gandhi’s from the South Africa days. Towards the end of that year, Bishop Frederick Fisher, in the journal ‘The Christian Century’, commented that ‘Here is an autobiography more captivating than fiction and a more revealing study of the human soul than I have ever read.’

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