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[BOOK EXCERPT](#)

# A new book examines Gandhi's perceptions of Australia and what Australians thought of him

An excerpt from 'Gandhi's Australia: Australia's Gandhi', by Thomas Weber.

[Thomas Weber](#)

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A statue of Gandhi in Canberra, Australia. | [Monument Australia](#)

After having read Sean Scalmers' book on the connection between Gandhi and the beginning of radical protest in the West, and noting that for him "the West" was limited to Britain and the United States of America, I started wondering about the

Mahatma's connection with Australia – a part of the world not covered by the Australian Scalmer. As an Australian academic, I had taught subjects heavily featuring Gandhi, had written about him for around forty years and had discussed him often with friends and colleagues. I knew that there were several books and lengthy articles on Gandhi and the West, on Gandhi and America, on Gandhi and Germany, and on Gandhi and Canada. This led me to wonder why I had not seen anything substantial on Gandhi's connections with Australia. Surely if America and Britain and even Canada could generate literature on the connections between their societies and the Mahatma, Australia, being similar to them in so many ways, should have done likewise. However, it did not take long to realise that this literature was either missing from Australian bookshelves and journals, or was overlooked. And this of course raised the question of why this was the case. Intrigued, in 2017 I started to investigate the links, or absence of them.

When I commenced work on this project, it had not occurred to me that I would have to write about myself. This may seem a little short-sighted given that I have probably written more about Gandhi, and have possibly taught as many courses specifically based around Gandhi, than anyone else in this country. As a result, I have decided to include this personal introduction in order to deflect possible charges of unwarranted self-promotion in the section dealing with Gandhi and the academy and to present my credentials for taking on this task.

In talking about Gandhi and Australia, I would like to start by asking the questions: What was Gandhi's relationship with Australia? What did he know about Australia? And what do we know about him?

Although as a subject Australia plays a very minor role in Gandhi's writings, most of what there are focuses on the then racist policies of the Australian government, what in Australia was called the White Australia Policy, a policy designed to keep out "Asiatics." He complained about the policy and pointed out not only its unfairness but also how in the long run it would hurt Australia.

An important source of Gandhi's knowledge about Australia, and Australia's knowledge of Gandhi, came from the Australian journalists and other visitors who sought him out. Many of them wrote articles in the Australian press giving their, usually very positive, assessments of the Mahatma.

The book details how Gandhi was portrayed in America and England to contrast with his portrayal in Australia, what he knew of and thought about Australia (not much given the “White Australia Policy”), about Australians who visited him and wrote about it (including Lord Casey), and what we knew and thought of him and how we got this knowledge - this takes me into his portrayal in our newspapers; university courses that featured him; writings by Australians about him; peace, environmental, religious and aid organisations that looked to his philosophy and activism as guideposts; overseas Gandhians who came to Australia to promote Gandhi; festivals and orations that are conducted in his name; Australian organisations that have championed him; statues of him that have been erected in several of our major cities and how he is viewed by the local Indian community.

There are Indian organisations in all of Australia’s states and most contain umbrella federations of Indian associations. They organise festivals (for example the Indian Association of South Australia conducts annual Gandhi Jayanti events at the site of the Gandhi bust at the University of Adelaide), edit Indian language publications, run several Indian language programs on radio, and provide opportunities for those wanting to study Indian languages or Indian dance. Many of them work hard to ensure that the younger generation knows something about the Mahatma, and some of them, such as Brisbane’s Gandhi Salt March Limited, have an explicitly Gandhian agenda of promoting the teachings of Gandhi and raising awareness of those teachings.

The website of the High Commission of India in Canberra lists Indian associations in Australia. While it is not clear how often the site is updated, in April 2019 the list detailed a surprisingly large number of them: a total of 251 are mentioned with thirty-two in the ACT, seventy-four in New South Wales, forty-six in Victoria, thirty-one in Queensland, forty-eight in Western Australia, nine in South Australia, one in Tasmania and ten in the Northern Territory. But, given the diversity of India and the large Indian population (now numbering almost half a million overseas born Indian residents and 619,000 with Indian ancestry) in the country, perhaps it is not that

surprising. The list specified organisations representing different language groups (for example Tamils, Bengalis, Malayalis and Gujaratis) and geographical regions of India, religious groups, sports and occupational associations, those with an interest in welfare or representing senior citizens, those concerned with the arts or education, and those that group Indian residents from certain areas of the local cities in which they live.

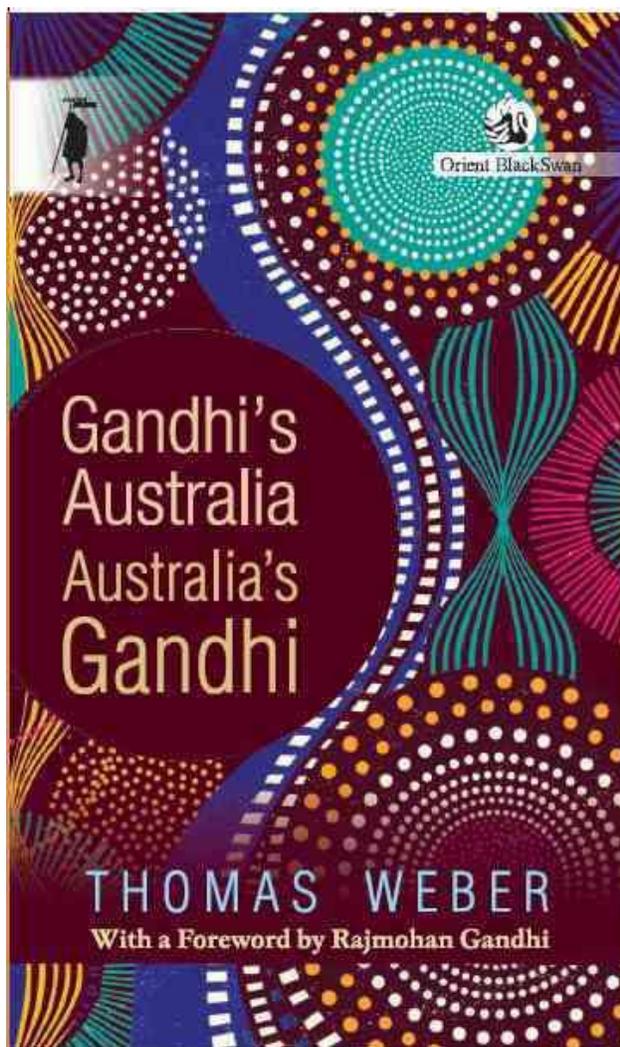
Several of these organisations still regularly hold celebratory functions on significant Indian independence or Gandhi-related dates. If they are held indoors, these generally involve speeches, often by a guest academic or community leader, and catered meals. They are also occasionally accompanied by exhibitions of Gandhi memorabilia (or at least photographs thereof) and framed or projected inspirational quotations attributed to the Mahatma. The outdoor functions are often conducted by one of the country's Gandhi statues. While Indian community leaders are invited to attend university Gandhi-related functions, such as those at the University of New South Wales, the general Indian population tends not to be present in anything but relatively small numbers. Conversely, large numbers of the local Indian population attend the unveiling of Gandhi statues, particularly when an important Indian official performs the celebratory task, and they appear in significant numbers at Gandhi-related functions organised by the consulates or the local Federation of Indian Associations, functions that relatively few non-Indians attend. In other words, the public does attend Gandhi-related functions; it's just that different sections of the public come to different events when they are not together listening to a public talk by a prominent visiting Indian Gandhi spokesperson.

Australia did not have any well-known Gandhi backer, and only a few internationally known reporters or authors interviewed Gandhi and wrote articles and books reporting on the experience. Australia's knowledge of the Mahatma came mostly from news sources, and those often reflected British interpretations of Gandhi's campaigns. Interestingly, those Australians who did visit Gandhi in India were often surprised by what they found, calling him "outstanding", "charming", "intelligent", "clean", "honest", someone with "tremendous dignity" and "mental energy", a "great man" surrounded by an "aura of peace." The fact that they were so impressed by him seemed to come as something of a revelation to them, one even commenting that the wrong impression of Gandhi was given by the press in Australia.

Since Gandhi's time, Australia has become a far more tolerant and multicultural society. The White Australia policy is now half a century in the past and thankfully the racist country he bitterly complained about no longer exists. Of course, this change to Gandhi's Australia had little to do with the Mahatma but the result is far

more in keeping with his view of the tolerant and welcoming society that this country could be. Australia's Gandhi is another story

Regardless of seemingly little obvious public interest in the Mahatma, in 1969 the Gandhi Birth Centenary was celebrated in Australia as it was in many places in the rest of the world. This resulted in Ray's and Rosenthal's books about Gandhi, Jayaprakash Narayan's visit to the country and various exhibitions, talks and articles in the leading papers. This legacy is now carried on by the Indian community which celebrates Gandhi's birthday with speeches and communal meals.



*Excerpted with permission from Gandhi's Australia: Australia's Gandhi, Thomas Weber, Orient Black Swan.*