

On Gandhi's trail

Anja Bohnhof's book of photographs, *Tracking Gandhi*, is on the locations that best define the man

■ TANYA ABRAHAM

Anja Bohnhof trained as a photographer before studying visual communication | photography at the Bauhaus University in Weimar. Since 2004 she has been working as a freelance photographer and visual artist.

She has many books and exhibitions to her credit.

In 2015 she received the Giesela Bonn-Award from the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, New Delhi for her work on India—in recognition of her significant contribution towards the deepening of Indo-German relations. In an email interview Anja speaks on her latest book that traces Mahatma Gandhi's journey in photographs with researched text.

Your book, *Tracking Gandhi*, is special to you. Why India?

I have done numerous projects in India over the last 10 years. I often pine for India, for what it beholds. In his novel *Shantaram*, Gregory Roberts wrote, "Sometimes, in India, you have to surrender before you win." I'd like to think I do that. During the 2014 Kochi-Muziris Biennale, I took portraits of famous figures in their childhood haunts in Kochi.

"Tracking Gandhi", started soon after. It has 78 large format photos of places related to his political work.

What was the journey like?

This work is a journey to the most important places in Gandhi's life— South Africa, Europe, Bangladesh, and India.

Pictures of the sites that have a key relationship with his political activities are ac-



Her quest Clockwise from right, Mahatma Gandhi's birthplace in Porbandar, Central Prison Pretoria, the book cover and Anja Bohnhof

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companied by text, which provide insights into his vision and the way he saw life.

Why the Mahatma?

Gandhi is very relevant in today's time: the main themes of his political, economic, ecological, and social programme seem prescient, to the problems of our time. His non-violent resistance is only directed against the British colonial system because of the time and place in which he lived; in reality, however, his philosophy is set in opposition to any form of arrogated power. A devout Hindu, he also invoked the



core message of Christianity, integrated the Koran into his public prayer gatherings, and thus made a priceless contribution to the integrative dialogue between the religions and cultures in India, and around the world. His educational principle was also a response to the disposition of people threatened by inhumane economic and political heteronomy. For him the goal of education was the lifelong process of personal moral development in service of the common good.

Can you recall interest-

ing memories of the journey?

India has contributed to humanity, in enormous ways, through the teachings of Gandhi. The experience of creating the photographs for me was, thus, exciting and diverse. In South Africa, it was difficult to find the places, which were inextricably linked to Gandhi. The focus is on Nelson Mandela and Gandhi's legacy plays a subordinate role in their historical consciousness. For example, Gandhi's former law office in Johannesburg on Rissik Street today is an en-

closed parking lot. But, conversely, the Pietermaritzburg train station has been lovingly refurbished, including the waiting room where Gandhi stayed on that fateful night, when he decided to remain and fight in South Africa.

Can you speak of moments that saw Gandhi come alive?

These experiences were seen in places that continue to cherish Gandhi's heritage. I had an inspiring on-campus discussion with students from Gujarat Vidyapith University about the Mahatma, and I loved being at the Navajivan Trust in Ahmedabad, amidst the piles of books Gandhi wrote. I also remember the Gandhi Ashram Trust in Noakhali, Bangladesh. The effort to keep his heritage alive on a daily basis makes his presence vividly alive here.

How is Tushar Gandhi involved, what are the details he shared that added to your work?

The book features my interview with Tushar Gandhi, interviewed as Gandhi's great-grandson as well as a socio-political peace activist, who is involved in advocating and spreading Gandhi's values and principles.

How would you say your work is different from the many Gandhi related publications?

At the outset and after careful research, I have concluded that, there is currently no such extensive publication focusing on the historical places worldwide that are in an important biographical or political context with regard to Gandhi's life. I have tried my best to vividly capture locations that best describe the man.