

# The Gandhian Vision : A Study of V.S. Naipaul's Perspective

Dr. Surinder Kumar

Associate Professor

GCG, Tarori (Karnal)

## Abstract

V.S. Naipaul's engagement with India and its socio-political evolution often finds a critical focal point in his reading of Mahatma Gandhi and Gandhian thought. His reflections, reveal a complex, often ambivalent perspective on Gandhi's philosophy and its impact on postcolonial India. This research paper examines Naipaul's interpretation of Gandhian vision, exploring the tension between admiration for Gandhi's moral courage and skepticism about his practical influence on modern Indian society.

Naipaul's initial encounters with Gandhi's legacy are marked by irony and disillusionment. Viewing Gandhianism as a form of mass hysteria rather than a transformative philosophy, Naipaul critiques the stagnation and backwardness he perceives in Indian life. However, his later works show a gradual shift in perception, where Gandhi emerges as a moral force who sought to spiritualize politics and restore dignity through self-discipline, simplicity, and non-violence. The paper argues that Naipaul's evolving view reflects his deeper struggle to reconcile India's traditional values with the demands of modernity.

By analyzing Naipaul's treatment of Gandhi's ideals – truth, non-possession, and rural reconstruction – the study reveals the author's underlying recognition of Gandhi's enduring relevance. Naipaul's writings, despite their critique, acknowledge that Gandhi provided a moral framework for a nation grappling with identity, faith, and reform. Ultimately, the paper concludes that Naipaul's perspective on Gandhi is not of rejection but of reluctant reverence: a recognition that Gandhi's spiritual vision continues to define the ethical core of Indian civilization, even amid its contradictions.

**Keywords :** Gandhi, Truth, Spiritual, Gandhian, Non-violence

It is undeniable that V.S. Naipaul holds a considerable degree of respect for Mahatma Gandhi's actions and historical contributions. Yet, despite his admiration for Gandhi's deeds,

Naipaul appears unable to grasp the deeper philosophical and spiritual dimensions of Gandhian thought. His understanding often remains confined to the surface of Gandhi's public

image rather than engaging with the profound ideological core that shaped Gandhi's worldview. Although Naipaul visited India on three different occasions, his encounters with the country rarely led him to perceive the "real Gandhi" as the moral and spiritual foundation of modern India. This limitation perhaps arises from Naipaul's essential orientation as a literary artist rather than as a philosopher or political thinker.

Naipaul, in his works, often overlooks one of the most significant aspects of Gandhi's legacy—his spiritualization of politics. For Gandhi, politics was not a field for power or manipulation but an ethical arena guided by truth (*Satya*) and non-violence (*Ahimsa*). He refused to adopt immoral or unjust means even for achieving noble ends, often paying a heavy personal price for this unwavering commitment to moral integrity. Naipaul, however, fails to recognize the depth of this moral idealism and tends to evaluate Gandhi's political philosophy from a pragmatic, rationalist, and somewhat Western perspective, which limits his understanding of Gandhi's inner strength.

Gandhi's moral and spiritual power was rooted in his deep faith in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Like Arjuna, he believed in the principle of selfless action—working with devotion and detachment from the fruits of one's deeds. This philosophy guided him throughout his life, especially during his long struggle for the rights of Black South Africans, a period of nearly two decades marked by immense perseverance and moral courage. Yet Naipaul, in his early work *An Area of Darkness* (1964), failed to appreciate the significance of this phase of Gandhi's life and its role in shaping his spiritual and political ideology.

Interestingly, Naipaul's recognition of Gandhi's contribution to South African politics

emerged much later in his career. In *Magic Seeds* (2006), he finally acknowledges that Gandhi had a definite vision during his years in South Africa and achieved considerable success in implementing it. This shift indicates a gradual evolution in Naipaul's perception—from viewing Gandhi merely as a symbolic "image" in 1962 to recognizing him, decades later, as a purposeful reformer whose influence extended far beyond India's borders.

Thus, Naipaul's engagement with Gandhi reveals both his admiration and his limitations. While he acknowledges Gandhi's greatness as a moral leader, he fails to fully comprehend the spiritual foundation that sustained Gandhi's political philosophy. In doing so, Naipaul overlooks the essential truth that Gandhi was not merely a political figure but a moral visionary who transformed politics into a vehicle of ethical and spiritual awakening.

V.S. Naipaul, despite his intellectual acuity and sharp observational skills, fails to grasp the depth of Gandhi's emotional and spiritual attachment to India and its people. When Gandhi returned to India from South Africa in 1915, he undertook an extensive journey across the country to understand its real condition. What he witnessed deeply disturbed him—he saw widespread poverty, squalor, and human suffering everywhere he went. The sight of beggars on the streets, unhygienic surroundings, and the ignorance of the masses filled him with anguish. Yet Gandhi's response was not one of disgust or detachment, as Naipaul would later interpret, but of profound compassion and moral responsibility. He saw the poverty and degradation not as inherent weaknesses of the Indian people but as the tragic outcome of centuries of exploitation under foreign rule and the neglect of indigenous values.

Naipaul, however, overlooks this crucial emotional and spiritual dimension of Gandhi's response. To him, Gandhi's association with the poor appeared symbolic rather than transformative. But in reality, Gandhi's mission went far beyond preaching idealism or offering moral lectures based on the *Bhagavad Gita*. Recognizing that words alone could not eradicate poverty, Gandhi formulated a constructive programme of action aimed at social, economic, and moral regeneration. Central to this programme was the idea of rural reconstruction, which he saw as the foundation of a self-reliant India. He believed that the solution to India's problems lay not in industrial expansion or urbanization, but in empowering villages—by creating local employment opportunities and fostering dignity in manual labour.

Gandhi's ideas were not formed in isolation; they reflected the influence of several Western thinkers and reformers whose works he admired. From John Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, Gandhi borrowed the concept of the dignity of labour and the moral worth of manual work. From Henry David Thoreau, he imbibed the principle of simplicity and self-reliance, which became the cornerstone of his philosophy of life. Guided by these influences, Gandhi inspired a large group of volunteers and followers to return to the villages and engage in constructive rural work—spinning, weaving, sanitation, and education.

One of the most symbolic and revolutionary elements of Gandhi's rural programme was his advocacy of the Charkha (spinning wheel). He proposed that spinning and weaving should become both a moral discipline and an economic solution to unemployment. Gandhi's call to adopt *Khadi* and boycott foreign cloth was not merely an act of political defiance against British imperialism but a movement for economic self-sufficiency and

cultural pride. This campaign had far-reaching consequences, as Indian labourers and peasants embraced *Khadi* as a symbol of national identity and moral strength. The industrial workers of Manchester and Leicester, whose factories depended on Indian markets, were angered by this movement, as it directly affected British trade. Yet, this powerful moment in India's social and economic awakening—where millions reclaimed their dignity through self-reliant labour—escaped Naipaul's critical vision.

Ironically, Naipaul was familiar with R.K. Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets*, a novel in which the protagonist, Jagan, embodies Gandhian ideals, particularly those related to simplicity, self-discipline, and economic ethics. Yet, Naipaul fails to perceive how such Gandhian principles continued to shape Indian life and thought. Gandhi's concept of trusteeship, borrowed again from Ruskin, urged wealthy industrialists and capitalists not to exploit their riches for selfish gain but to act as moral custodians—or trustees—of their wealth for the welfare of society. This idea represented Gandhi's attempt to reconcile moral philosophy with practical economics, creating a middle path between capitalism and socialism.

In failing to recognize these dimensions, Naipaul's critique of Gandhi remains incomplete. His analysis lacks the empathy to understand Gandhi's deeply rooted connection with the Indian soul—a connection that transformed spiritual ideals into actionable programmes for national regeneration. Gandhi was not a mere reformer or preacher; he was a visionary who redefined politics as a moral calling and economic independence as a spiritual duty. Naipaul, despite his intellectual brilliance, could not fully comprehend this synthesis of the moral, spiritual, and practical aspects of Gandhi's mission, which lay at the very heart of modern India's awakening.

This aspect of Gandhian economy has also been ignored by V.S. Naipaul in *An Area of Darkness*.

Naipaul's vision of Gandhi is defective. Gandhi reached England to get education of law and took interest in many activities of social welfare. For example, he became a strong member of vegetarian society and inspired Britishers to take vegetarian food. Gandhi refers this fact in his *Autobiography* but V.S. Naipaul does not bother for it. He blames Gandhi for not describing the glory of London of 1890. Actually Gandhi attached equal importance to all religions of the world and was not blind spiritually. If London was new, Gandhi had his strong Indian habit to support him in moment of crisis. Gandhi had not gone there to write a book on the difference between Indian culture and western culture as he depended mainly upon internal strength. Since his childhood, he had full faith in truth, non-violence and Satyagrah. If he tasted non-vegetarian food as a student at an early age, he felt the lamb bleating in his stomach. He felt ashamed of himself as he had to tell a lie to his mother. Then he felt guilty at heart when he reached the gate of a prostitute being encouraged by a friend. God saved him at the nick of time and Gandhi remained a man of character. He frankly admits his faults and defects of his character in his *Autobiography* and most of his critics admire him for this. Unfortunately V.S. Naipaul fails to appreciate this trait of Gandhi's personality.

Gandhi made experiments of Satyagraha in South Africa. He had all sympathies for the Blacks of this country. The poor people of Zulu led a miserable life and lived in poor huts. Like poor Indian farmers, they plastered the walls of the huts with animal dung. In *Satyagraha* in South Africa, Gandhi writes a lot about the miseries of South Africans as authorities were not prepared to give them equal rights. Racial differences were

serious and even Gandhi was not allowed to travel in Railway compartment of the whites. All such facts may be unimportant for V.S. Naipaul but not for general readers. Dr. Vasant S. Patel remarks

The worth of the *Autobiography* lies, as the title itself suggests in Gandhi's experiments with truth. The declaration of truth, though it may be humiliating to his personality is important and need appreciation. (V.S.N. 153)

In *Half A Life*, V.S. Naipaul refers to the miseries of Willie's father who burnt his books after getting the call of Gandhi to boycott college. His father ignored the girl proposed for him from a decent family and married with an untouchable. Ultimately Willie's father suffered a lot due to these steps as he had to give up his job for these actions. In the novel *Waiting for The Mahatma*, Gandhi comes to Malgudi and shows love and affection towards the untouchables. Without bothering for the anger of Brahmins, Gandhi advocated equal rights for the Harijans and even lived with them. As V.S.Naipaul had not minutely observed the miseries of Indian untouchables, he could not appreciate Gandhi's humanism. Actually V.S.Naipaul is not interested in the early life of Gandhi. However, he wrote *The Writer's People: Ways of Feeling And Writing*. Now he starts admiring Gandhian ethics. Gandhi is not just product of Indian history and at times many Congress members fail to appreciate his steps. For example, Gandhi gave the call for non-cooperation movement, Civil Disobedience Movement and Quit India Movement and felt shocked when the freedom fighters became violent towards the Britishers. It is true that he wanted Swaraj for the country but not through bloodshed of any race. As a visionary, he did not want bad relations between India and England even after India's freedom. In some of his speeches Gandhi made it clear that all Indians are impatient to obtain

Swaraj. Let Indians have their own government. Let the people get education according to the needs of the country. Fundamental rights should be granted to them without delay. Let there be no racial discrimination in India. He had respect for British law and many European institutions and yet wanted everything according to Indian system. Gandhi has not failed if he refused to accept Western Industrial Civilization. He has not failed if he refused to establish big industry in India and asserted the need of cottage industries? He was not a narrow-minded Hindu as he belongs to whole of India. R. K. Narayan, M.R. Anand, Sarojini Naidu, Dr. Radhakrishnan, R.N. Tagore, Pt. Nehru and other literary artists accept this fact easily but this fact is a bitter pill to be swallowed by V.S. Naipaul. Dr. Vasant S. Patel remarks:

Naipaul is unaware that he steadily distorts his own views by ignoring the distinction made by Gandhiji. While interpreting Gandhi's action, Naipaul denies them any important significant as Naipaul feels Gandhi's marches and walks were 'purely symbolic.' (V.S.N. 161)

By 1930 Gandhi had become popular for his political and economic thoughts. He reached Dandi to revolt against the Salt Act of Britain. This Dandi March of Gandhi was a real threat to British Empire. Regarding the effect of this march Dr. Vasant, S. Patel remarks:

Really speaking, the genesis of true satyagraha lies in the Dandi March a model of adherence to basic principles. The immediate objective of the Dandi March was to remove the laws working a hardship upon the poor. In the settlement, between Gandhi and the viceroy, as a result of the march, the immediate object redress of grievances arising from the salt Act was realized to a substantial degree. (V.S.N. 162)

Gandhi attached due importance to Brahmacharya and did not allow sex for mere pleasure. V.S. Naipaul fails to understand this policy of restraint as prescribed in the Hindu scriptures. Westernised Naipaul remarried Nadira Alvi though he was sixty four years of age. It seems that Naipaul fails to understand the relation between the aims of Gandhi and his Autobiography. Like Vivekananda and R.N. Tagore, Gandhi wanted to lead the life of a liberated person. Had he desired to be in power, he would have accepted the post of the President of congress party. Inspite of his interest in Swaraj, he thought of Nirvana. Dr. Vasant S. Patel remarks:

Naipaul's denial examine their interdependence makes out Gandhi to be a crank who accidentally led, India to freedom, all the while striving for his own salvation. Naipaul has failed to understand the significance of what he has said. Gandhi in his Autobiography, explicitly describes that what he wishes to achieve and has been striving to achieve for thirty years in moksha. (V.S.N. 163)

He adds-

Naipaul is foreign to Gandhi's vow of brahmacharya taken in South Africa. Naipaul thinks Gandhi: turned inward and, at the age of thirty seven, did what he had been thinking about for six years; to take the Hindu vow of brahmacharya, the vow of lifelong sexual abstinence. And the logic was like this: to serve humanity, as he was there serving the Africans, it was necessary for him to deny himself "the pleasures of family life." (V.S.N. 163-164)

Many Christian and Muslims were surprised to see the secular approach of Gandhi as he was above narrow prejudices:

Gandhi was actually not bound by any sect or religion as such. He was in a way above all religious sects. He was not held by any group or ism. He was neither a non-conformist Hindu nor a nonconformist nationalist. His religion belonged to all sects in particular and all religions in general. His approach to religion was humanistic. Man and human relation was in the center of his idea of religion. (V.S.N. 164)

A few questions arise here such as - Is there no practical aspect of Gandhian economics? Was Gandhi prepared to follow the theory-Ends justify the means? Was he prepared to live in intellectual darkness? Is he worshipped only as an image? Is his concept of new India impractical? Did his plan for rural economy succeed? Was he unjustified in his approach towards Panchayat Raj System? Was he not prepared to give equal right to women? How did he win the hearts of leaders of the world? Why did he live in Sabarati Ashram, far away from the glory of the towns of India? Why were the British politicians afraid of his political ways? Why did he keep fast when he saw riots in Bengal? Why did he ask Jinna to accept the concept of United India? Why did he weep badly when India was divided into two parts in the name of religion? Why did he feel in 1946 that he was not very much wanted in Indian politics? What kind of joy did he feel when Zamindari System was abolished in India? Have we given a practical shape to his concept of Ram Rajya?

V.S. Naipaul visited India after Mrs. Indira Gandhi had introduced emergency in India. She suspended all the fundamental rights of people. All fundamentals of democracy were ignored and her concept of democratic socialism was fake. V.S.Naipaul felt shocked when he saw the results of emergency in India. Gandhism was missing in the country. However, V.S. Naipaul's

estimate of Gandhi is a little hasty as Dr. Vasant S. Patel remarks:

Naipaul's reading of Gandhi and Gandhianism is to the point in some cases, where as in other Naipaul seems to be hasty in giving opinions. Gandhianism to Naipaul was almost a mass hysteria in India. But now he says that it is of a healthy kind. Good old values are packaged in a modern-looking way, very mass based. Gandhi, Naipaul believes now, found a way of making old truths appear simple. (V.S.N. 175-176)

V.S. Naipaul's evaluation of Gandhi and Gandhianism reveals both insight and inconsistency. While some of his observations reflect a sharp understanding of Gandhi's role in shaping modern India, at other times his judgments appear overly hasty and critical. Initially, Naipaul regarded Gandhianism as a form of mass hysteria—a collective emotional response rather than a rational movement. However, his later reflections indicate a notable shift in perception. He comes to recognize that this so-called "mass hysteria" was, in fact, a healthy social awakening, rooted in the revival of traditional values expressed in a modern, accessible form. Naipaul ultimately acknowledges Gandhi's genius in presenting ancient moral and spiritual truths in a manner that resonated with the common people. Thus, his reassessment moves from skepticism to a more balanced appreciation of Gandhi's enduring influence on India's moral and cultural consciousness.

## Works Cited

Dr. Vasant S. Patel. V.S. Naipaul's India: A Reflection, New Delhi : Standard Publications, 2005.

William Walsh. V.S. Naipaul, Edinburgh : Oliver and Boyd, 1973.