

FROM THE ARCHIVES OF THE SANGRAHALAYA:  
REMINISCENCE OF PROF. NIRMAL KUMAR BASU.

[Prof. Nirmal Kumar Basu was closely connected with the Gandhian Movement for over twenty five (25) years since 1922. While Gandhiji was in Noakhali on a Peace Mission Tour in 1946-47 Prof. Basu was his Private Secretary and Interpreter. During Gandhiji's Bihar sojourn during the retaliatory communal riots there in 1947 Prof. Basu accompanied him also as his Private Secretary. He was author of several books on Gandhiji including 'Selections from Gandhi' which is widely known. Later Prof. Bose was Director of the Anthropological Survey and Commissioner of Schedule Caste and Tribe, etc..

He was interviewed by Shakti Ranjan Bose, then Organising Secretary of the Sangrahalaya, on the 9<sup>th</sup> March, 1966. Prof. Basu was 66 years old at that time.]

“Shakti Balu, it is very kind of you to ask me present some of my reminiscences about Gandhiji for permanent record.

Two (2) events stand out very prominently in my mind – one when I first met Gandhiji personally at Wardha and the other was in Calcutta (now Kolkata), when he left Bengal, never to return to our land any more. These two (2) events stand out for particular reasons which I try to relate carefully.

It was on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November, 1934, that I first met Gandhiji in Wardha. It was about half-past four (4 PM) we rushed into a room at the top of the Mahila Ashram or Women Institute where Gandhiji had taken up his residence ever since his abandonment of the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad. Sevagram had not yet come into being and he occupied a clean and spacious room in the brick built building. When we entered the room we found Gandhiji seated behind a small desk near the southern end close to the door which opened out into an open space. A spotlessly clean white hand-spun Khadi 'dori' was spread which covered almost the whole of the floor and the small desk had paper and writing materials on it. There seemed to be not many men around. However, Pyarelalji, his Secretary, was there and a few women workers were in attendance.

What impressed me at the first glance were the perfect cleanliness and the almost static simplicity of the furnishing of the room. The time of interview had been fixed outside the usual or reserved for that purpose. When all of us had seated ourselves in a semi circle Gandhiji opened the conversation. It appeared that there had been some difference between Abdul Gaffar Khan and his son. Abdul Gaffar Khan had recently started a political Journal in Pustu language, which was his mother tongue, and was naturally anxious to enlist his son's active support in the new enterprise, for his son had already earned some reputation as a good writer in Pustu. While stating his case the elder Khan Saheb said that educated persons were very rare and instead of becoming a soldier why we should not employ such talents for the service of the uneducated countrymen. His son was, whoever, reluctant and frankly confessed that he had no interest in politics and preferred to work in a factory and spend his spare time in pursue of art.

Gandhiji sat silently listening and when the two had finished he turned to Achayya Kripalani and enquired of him what Gani's Principal told about him. Acharyya Kripalani reported that the Principal had a favorable opinion about his talents, but Gani was never serious in his works. Gandhiji broke into a laughter and said "see that he does not flirt with anything else". I never imagined that Gandhiji could joke in this manner. But when he did all of us joined in the laughter and the serious atmosphere that filled the room disappeared. Gandhiji then turned to Abdul Gaffer Khan and spoke more seriously. He was of opinion that when God had given Gani a talent in art he had no right to harness Gani to any other purpose. What we could do was to help Gani in his growth and therefore Gani should promise to go to Santiniketan sometimes every year. Prof. Kripalani now added that the Principal had said that Gani had special talent for sculpture and since he could not give Gani much instruction he should seek it elsewhere. Gandhiji intervened and said that Nandalal knew the proper culture of art and Gani must imbibe it from him. Abdul Gaffer Khan was listening silently and when Gandhiji pronounced his final judgment he took it with calmness like a good soldier. However, what appeared surprising to me was with what tenderness Gandhiji treated the case of an artist in distress and that in the midst of political tension in 1934, through which the country was then passing.

When Gani's case was over Gandhiji turned to me and asked me to tell him something about me. It was an embarrassing question but I succeeded in briefly recollecting my antecedents. Then he said that Kakasaheb (Acharya Kakasaheb Kalelkar) had informed him that I wanted to discuss few questions with him. I then handed him the questions I brought in writing. He went through them carefully and as none of these

questions was private in nature he enquired whether these could be discussed among the present persons. There was nothing to object and he started to discuss.

The same evening we went out for walk with Gandhiji. In spite of his being slightly bent due to age and wearing loose sandals he could walk very fast indeed. We accompanied him for over a mile and then he turned back to return. What then I noticed was that he picked up a few pieces of stone and Khan Saheb did the same and advised us to collect also. I picked up a big block as much as I could comfortably carry and all of us deposited our load on a heap already there at a certain point of the back yard (garden) of the Mahila Ashram. I enquired with Gaffar Khan Saheb about the accumulation and was told that since the Ashram was a little away from the main road and one had to cover a long sticky muddy road during the rains to reach it, some engineers were called but the estimates had been too high for the Ashram. So, Gandhiji had proceeded in the direct manner to deal with the problem – the problem of road-building. He had promised to collect all necessary materials for the road in the course of a few months and this could reduce the cost of the road to a considerable extent. Thus every morning and evening walks were meant not only to keep the Ashramites fit, but also to add to the wealth of the establishment in a different way. In Gandhiji's opinion there seemed to be no problem which an individual could not solve, however small he might be, if he properly applied his mind. Indeed Gandhiji had the genius of discovering solutions in the most ingenious way. Also he wanted to involve as many to raise many dutiful individuals in the process.

I would now recount to you the second (2<sup>nd</sup>) event to which I referred to earlier and which has left a deep impression upon my mind. The event took place after India became free and towards the end of the month of August, 1947. The riots in Calcutta (now Kolkata) had come to an end but unfortunately, on the 31<sup>st</sup> of August there was a recurrence. Gandhiji was at that time stationed in a camp in Beliaghata (East Calcutta). Around there was the Miabagan Basti from where Muslim workers were driven out and Gandhiji went there and appealed to the Hindu young men to bring back the Muslims. After some discussions the young men were convinced that there should be no discrimination in modern India and they promised that they would do as Gandhiji had advised, and provide adequate protection for the Muslims on their return. However, there had been recurrence of riots in another part of the city unfortunately and those who came back to the Basti felt nervous and although Gandhiji and the local Hindu young men assured them of protection they wanted to be taken back to the predominantly Muslim area of Rajabagan. Gandhiji thought of giving them a chance and himself was present when the evacuation took place. A

truck-load of people proceeded towards Rajabagan, but as it went to some distance two (2) bombs were thrown at it suddenly and some men were killed. We all rushed to the scene of the disaster and Gandhiji also reached the spot with a grave face. Immediately the dead bodies were removed and the rest of the Muslim Basti – dwellers were removed to safety.

In any case I found the young men, who promised to Gandhiji to provide protection to the Basti-people, at some distance from the scene of the disaster and reaching then I enquired why, inspite of their promise to Gandhiji, they had brought about such a ghastly misdeed. They said that they were not responsible, but two (2) among them, who were not convinced by Gandhiji's arguments, had been responsible for the murders, that took place almost before Gandhiji's eyes. While talking to them we reached the Miabagan Basti again as there still some people remained to be evacuated. However, the young men told me that this would not happen again and the remaining people might not be evacuated and they would arrange their protection, but might use violence to thwart another attack which could happen in the night organized by some among them. But there was a request that they wanted to make to Gandhiji through me that they knew nothing about non-violence and protect the Baste-dwellers by means of violence as they had bren-guns and stenguns and if the police arrested them for this Gandhiji might help them to become free. It was a strange request, but I went to Gandhiji's camp and related to him the whole event and the young men's request to him. He listened with calmness and immediately said – “tell the young men that I am with them”. I was surprised at this reply and when I said “Bapu what about non-violence?” – He answered – “what I told you is an order”. So I went back to the young men to carry the order.

Late that night I sat at his feet and asked him – “Bapu, you must explain to me why you supported this attempt to using violence to protect the Bustee-dwellers”. He said that the Congress Government had failed to protect these men who had been killed and if some young men took upon themselves the responsibility to protect the poor by means of violence he would certainly support their cause but not the means. I said – “but what are you going to do about non-violence?” He said that he was also thinking about this. He had already written out a long statement in which he said – “I am going to fast in order to bring the people of Calcutta to sanity. Now if good people of the city are started by my fast and come forward and stop the riot in every quarter of the town, I would break my fast, otherwise not”. Fortunately after three (3) days of fasting the good people of Calcutta, who did not want the riot to continue, came forward and actually exhausted them in order to get the city free from riots. Hindus

and Muslims came to Gandhiji's camp and surrendered some weapons at his feet. They surrendered their arms because Gandhiji's Fast had touched their hearts.

When everything became quite and a promise had been given by our national leaders, whether Hindus or Muslims, Sikhs or Christians, that they would see to it that there would not be any further incident of riot in the city of Calcutta, Gandhiji broke his fast.

I remember during these days, as we watched him from minute to minute, how he talked to the people to convince them, how he convinced the members the government about their duties and responsibilities during such situations and thereafter and also the common people who should also do something of which they were capable. If peace was to be restored and maintained it was not merely the duty and responsibility of the government organization but also of every single citizen and it was his genius to discover how the government could work in one manner while the common citizen also work in order to bring peace and set a new ideal before the country. I believe these lessons which Gandhiji laid down for India has a permanent value for all of us. He also showed us how to discriminate between violence and non-violence and also the ultimate efficacy of non-violence. This was Gandhiji. He did not discourage people to take up a violent measure for a moral cause, at the first instance. He would not argue but would show what was more effective to convince them the power of non-violence, indicating what should he followed to build up a good and great nation. And all these staking his own life.