On the 2nd may 1964, on behalf of the Barrackpore Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya we approached Shri Surendranath Biswas at his Calcutta residence. He is now 80. Shri Biswas was closely connected with the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee and the All India Congress Committee. He was in the thick of fight during the Non-Cooperation days. He also took up in right earnest the constructive work inaugurated by Mahatma Gandhi. Being questioned by me as to how he was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi’s politics he said:

Mahatma Gandhi took the lead of the Congress in the year 1920. His first act was to convert the Indian National Congress from an organization of the
intelligentsia into an organization of the entire nation with the creed of attainment of Swaraj by all legitimate and peaceful means. The intelligentsia and the illiterate masses, the rich and the poor, the men and the women, all alike were called upon to become members of the Congress and millions of them responded to his call. The spirit of sacrifice being inherent in the Indian mind he drew up the programme of non violent Non-Cooperation which involved sacrifices on the part of every worker. Following the golden rule of ‘example is better than precept’, he as a true leader sacrificed all his earthly possessions and came down to the level of the common man. He then called upon the lawyers of India to suspend their practice and to work out the programme. I was then a lawyer of thirteen year’s practice. I could not resist the call and gave up my practice for good and joined the movement as a whole time worker.

Q: Mr. Biswas would you kindly tell us as to what notable events happened at and about the Bengal Provincial Conference held at Madaripur in May 1925 which Mahatma Gandhi was pleased to attend?
We invited the Bengal Provincial and Political Conference in 1925 at Faridpur. It was held on 2nd and 3rd May. It was a historic conference. The greatest man of the age Mahatma Gandhi honoured it by his presence. The great leader of India Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das presided over it with the object of making a historic announcement. Many eminent leaders of India also attended it. The conference opened at noon. After my speech as the Chairman of the Reception Committee and the President’s speech were delivered, the deliberations were adjourned to the noon of the following day. The Subject Committee sat in the evening but I could not attend it as I had to stay at my residence to attend to Mahatma Gandhi. At dead of night Deshbandhu Das was returning from the Conference. He stopped his car in front of my residence and called me to see him. As soon as I went near his car he handed over to me a small piece of paper whereon were written the words, “I resign my Presidency C. R. Das” and told me to elect a new President on the following day. I was simply stunned to hear him and to receive the note. I passed the night awake. In the early morning Deshbandhu Das came to my residence. Mahatmaji was moved to look at Deshbandhu’s face and gently patting
him on the back said, “Dad you look very much upset. Tell me what has happened?” Mahatma ji’s affectionate query drew tears from his eyes and with a choked voice Deshbandhu said, “Mahatma ji my life’s ambition is lost. My resolution for honourable cooperation was negated by the Subject Committee yesterday night. I shall tell you why I want the resolution to be passed. I joined your movement of non-violent Non-Cooperation with the hope that the British Government will be forced by our activities under your leadership to grant us at least sufficient reforms if not complete independence which we might utilize as the jumping ground for further struggle for complete independence but you called off the movement of Non-Cooperation. We then lost the Council Entry Programme and went on wrecking the diarchy. The success of our policy has outwitted the British Government. I have got a gesture from Lord Birkenhead that if you would abandon our policy of wrecking the diarchy our Congress shall be granted sufficient reforms by working out which we shall be able to a lot of good to our people. I and my colleagues in the Swarajya party are prepared to abandon the said policy in return for the proposed reforms. I wanted to speedily make the announcement of the change of our policy by passing an appropriate resolution in this Conference in your presence and with your approval. I should now explain to you why I want the reforms.

Your movement on Non-Cooperation having been withdrawn the next and last weapon that remains in the armoury of the Congress is mass Civil Disobedience and for such movement to be successful we require full cooperation and active participation of the masses and their determination to face bullets and other sufferings that the British might inflict upon them. You cannot expect such cooperation of the masses unless they have full confidence in the leadership of the Congress. They do not understand political slogans. They want bread and cloth. Your Congress cannot give them bread and cloth. If we get sufficient reforms as proposed by Lord Birkenhead we shall be able to give them bread and cloth by working out the same. We shall then tell them that we served you thus far but cannot serve further until our country becomes free from alien rule. You should therefore join the Congress Movement for driving out the alien rulers. Then and then only you will expect the masses to follow the Congress and take part in this mass Civil
Disobedience movement.” Mahatmaji patiently listened to Deshbandhu’s argument and said, “Das I appreciate what you have said. Don’t you worry! I shall see that your resolution is passed in this Conference.” Mahatmaji then asked me to call the members of the Subject Committee to meet him at 10 am. They came in time. Mahatmaji addressed the members as follows, “Friends I have called you to answer a few questions which I shall presently put to you. I want your answers in the form of yes or no. I shall not admit any argument. Now my first question is do you realize that you are so many soldiers fighting the freedom of your motherland and that you are in the battle field? Say ‘yes’ or ‘no’.” They all answered, “Yes”. “My second question is you have made Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das the Commander-in-Chief of this battle so far as Bengal is concerned. Say ‘yes’ or ‘no’.” They all answered, “Yes”. “My third question is do you admit that it is the bounding duty of every soldier to obey the command of the Commander-in-Chief so long as he is in the battle field? Say ‘yes’ or ‘no’. They all answered, “Yes.” Gandhiji continued, “Now I request you to obey the command of Deshbandhu Das and pass his resolution on honourable cooperation before the conference meets at 12 p.m. Before we part I shall tell you that if you do not do so I shall preside over the deliberations of the Conference and get his resolution passed by the house.” And in fact the resolution was subsequently passed by the Subject Committee and carried by the open house. This happened on 3rd May, 1925 and the steps to carry the said resolution to the White Hall was duly taken but unfortunately before the British Government took any action thereof Deshbandhu Chittaranjan died on 16th June, 1925, and the British Government withdrew their offer. I have narrated the Subject Committee incident in full details just to show how Gandhiji dearly loved Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das. I wholly believe that Mahatmaji always remembered that it was the astounding sacrifice of Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das which electrified the entire nation to accept Gandhiji’s programme of non violent Non-Cooperation. As for myself, I felt at the time of joining the movement that Deshbandhu Das was to Mahatmaji what Narendranath or swami Vivekananda was to Paramhansa Ramakrishnadeva.

Q : Mr. Biswas, so far as I remember Mahatmaji had been to Madaripur and attended a spinning
demonstration there. Please let us
have an idea of the demonstration.
Mahatma went to Madaripur, the place
of my birth and public activities on or
about the 12th June, 1925. He stayed at
my residence for a few hours and
thereafter in the evening addressed two
meetings - one a ladies meeting and the
other a public meeting. In the elite
meeting my wife read the Address of
Welcome. While she was reading out the
address I held a lantern to her. When
Mahatma found that the lantern was
not near enough he snatched it from my
hand and held the lantern himself to my
wife. About two hundred charkhas were
humming at the ladies meeting and a
number of fallen women were spinning
at the corner of the meeting place.
Addressing the volunteers Mahatma
said, “Take up the work of protecting
these fallen sisters. Form a Women’s
Volunteer League for the reclamation
of fallen women and work through that
league. You have said in your address
that Madaripur has been marked by
Government as the chief among the
revolutionary centres. Well! Nothing
short of revolution is needed amongst
the women of India and may Madaripur
lay the foundation of this revolution. My
wife presented to him a piece of loin
cloth woven by her with yarn spun by
herself and my children. Mahatma
expressed his great pleasure and
remarked that he was all the more glad
to receive such a precious thing from the
hands of a Swarajist’s wife.

Q : Mr. Biswas ‘Swaraj is our
Birthright’ that was what you had said
during our struggle against the British
Raj. I remember you attended the
Madras Session of the Congress held in
December 1927. Would you kindly give
us a gist of the talk between Gandhiji
and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru about
the Congress creed?
The event took place in my presence
during the plenum session of the
Congress at Madras in 1927. In the
morning of the first day of the Session
I was sitting in the room with my wife
where Mahatma was plying the
charkha. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said
that he intended to move a resolution
in the Subject Committee for amending
the Congress creed for which he sought
his permission. Mahatma seemed to
be surprised and asked what his
amendment was. Panditji said that he
wanted to substitute the words
‘Complete Independence’ for the word
‘Swaraj’ in the creed. The creed was
the attainment of Swaraj by legitimate
and peaceful means. Mahatma asked,
“Why?” Panditji said, “Bapuji I have recently toured in Europe wherever I went I was asked, what was the goal of your Congress?” To whoever I said it was ‘Swaraj’ they simply laughed at me and remarked, “Either say Complete Independence or nothing. We do not understand your Swaraj!” That is why I want the outside world to know that our national Congress stands for independence. Mahatmaji very calmly said, “My dear young friend, for my life I cannot be a party to it. I want Swaraj for every man and woman of India. I also want complete independence. But you may as a means to that end. If you so desire you may move a separate resolution to demand Complete Independence and I shall support it. Panditji agreed and a separate resolution demanding Complete Independence was moved and carried.

Q : Mr. Biswas here is my last question to you. If I’m not mistaken you met Gandhiji at Sodepur Ashram and had a talk with him about Food Control. Just tell us how Gandhiji felt about it.

In the year 1945 while Mahatma Gandhi staying at the residence of our esteemed friend Shri Satish Chandra Dasgupta, I wrote to him informing him that the poor people of this Province were suffering a great deal owing to government’s control of food and requested him to take up the matter with the then Governor of Bengal. Satishbabu wanted me to go to Sodepur and discuss the proven points of the question with Mahatmaji. I did so. Mahatmaji seemed to have been convinced that the control should go. He took up the matter with the Governor but to no avail. Later on, after independence was achieved, Mahatmaji asked Sardar Patel to withdraw the control. Sardarji objected and said that the poor men would suffer if the control was withdrawn. Thereupon Mahatmaji said that the poor men themselves wanted the withdrawal. Sardarji observed that they were mistaken. To that Mahatmaji retorted, “Let the poor men have the freedom to commit mistakes.” The control was eventually withdrawn.