

Making the Photographer a Political Cultural Worker: Sunil Janah

Ram Rahman

It was perhaps inevitable that Bengal would produce the outstanding figure in Indian photography in the forties – thrown up from a cultural milieu which was urban, cosmopolitan, highly educated, politically ablaze, and highly artistically sensitized. Any reflection on this period inevitably involves a close look at the national movement and all the radical streams it generated in Indian society. Photography, by the very nature of the medium, was ideally placed to play a more directly activist role in the struggle for independence from colonial rule and social justice, and Sunil Janah, more than any other figure in India, seized on its creative possibilities to produce a body of work rich in detail, expansive in its breadth and powerful in its political vision.

As a student of English in Calcutta's Presidency College in the late 1930s, Janah had plunged headlong into underground Leftwing politics on the campus and had joined the Student Federation. The Communist Party had been banned by the British until the Communists publicly supported the allied coalition in the Second World War in their battle against fascism in Europe. Intending to become a journalist, he had never thought of becoming a photographer. He had been mentored in the darkroom by the photographer Shambhu Shaha. 'Photography was my hobby and I was good at it', said Janah, who was photographing Party activities at the time with his own Rolleiflex camera. Janah had won a 5th prize in the competition for amateurs run by the *Illustrated Weekly of India* as a twelve year old, and an uncle had given him a book – *Making a Photograph* – by the American Ansel Adams, which had made him realise that 'till a print was finished and on a gallery wall, a photograph was not complete.' It was P.C. Joshi, the visionary Secretary of the Communist Party, who noticed his talent and persuaded him to photograph the Famine raging in Bengal in 1943. Janah abandoned his studies under the influence of the charismatic Joshi. As they travelled through Bengal, Janah's photographs appeared with Joshi's reporting on the famine in the pages of the Party journal *People's War*.

These pictures were also produced as postcards which were sold to raise funds for famine relief. 'Overnight I found I had become a photographer.' Janah gained immediate recognition for these pictures, that were seen not just in India, but were also published in the Communist Party sister papers 'all over the world... in England, Australia and even the United States.' The artist Chittaprosad was another Joshi find who travelled with them making drawings and sketches and, like Janah, also writing for *People's War*. These photographs and the reportage revealed the enormous tragedy unfolding in Bengal which the British were keen on hiding. They were complicit in the unfolding tragedy as rice and grains were diverted to the war front and transport barges were diverted or destroyed.

After this, Joshi persuaded Janah to move to the Party headquarters in Bombay, and live in the Party commune for the next six years. The Party bought him a 35mm Leica, and gave him a membership card. 'I was a non-joiner – I didn't join photographic societies, join this, join that. When I was accepted as a member and the card was given to me, I didn't resist!' About his politics Janah says, 'Practically every intelligent creative person back then was a Leftist... it was in the air.' He felt that the Congress represented the tradition of liberal humanism... which was not enough to bring justice to the poor. "I felt that with the Congress the power would just be transferred from the British capitalists to the Indian capitalists... which is exactly what happened". The Communist Party had set up the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) in 1936 and the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in 1942. Almost all the important actors, poets, writers, dancers and musicians in India were members of these. It was Joshi's vision that culture was integral to political action in the struggle against colonial rule and for social justice. He set up culture squads of singers and dancers to travel across India and perform progressive plays for peasants and workers.

In the Party headquarters in Bombay, we had an assorted lot of interesting people from all over the country to work with, and many others dropped in - writers, journalists, actors, musicians, artists - in some connection or other. The Party had its own cultural front - The People's Theatre, The Progressive Writers' and Artists' Association, The Friends of the Soviet Union, and its own "cultural squad" of dancers, musicians, actors and singers who gave performances at worker and peasant rallies and on stage to the public in the cities. We lived in three different houses. The premises on Sandhurst Road had all the fine editorial offices, rooms for the three top Party leaders, Joshi, Adhikari and B.T.Ranadive and their families and a few other senior comrades who lived and worked there. It also had a kitchen, a pantry, a large dining

hall, and a larger hall for meetings. The people working on the editorial and organisational side of our paper and publications were housed in another building, which we had capriciously named the Red Flag Hall was located some two hundred yards down the road. The third building, a dilapidated mansion of a house, on its own spacious grounds, was rented in suburban Andheri to accommodate our cultural squad. There was some uncertainty about where the artist Chittaprosad and I should be put. We opted to move to the livelier place. Here I could stay immersed in music, song and dance around me. A room was found for Chitta to work, undisturbed, in a house on the road to the railway station just a few minutes walk away.¹

In Bombay, Sunil Janah published regularly in *People's War* and later in its next avatar, *People's Age*, his writing accompanying the photos he took all over India. He credits the newspaper for pioneering work in India in its extensive use of photography, unusual for a paper cheaply produced with Party funds. It was during this period that he documented all the political actions and meetings of the Congress, the Communists and the Muslim League. This led him to a close familiarity with all the major leaders of the national movement, and his portraits of them are famous icons we have all grown up with, in most cases not knowing the name of the photographer. The craft was critical and the basis of any substantive work. This level of awareness was unquestionably rooted in the extremely cosmopolitan outlook of the Bengali middle class, and would have been rare even in Bombay at the time. He cites his familiarity with painting as a major influence on how he made his pictures. Always particular about the aesthetics of the image and its composition, he abhorred the shoddiness of the unconsidered snapshot – even in the relatively mundane reportage of a political meeting.

One of the first books I read about photography was Ansel Adams' "Making a Photograph" and that had set up standards for me. I realised, of course, that I could not use a large format camera on a tripod, as Adams liked to do, for taking my candid documentary photographs. Besides, with a large format camera using plates or sheet films, every single exposure can be individually processed as needed for optimum performance, which, of course, cannot be done with a roll film camera. Therefore technical perfection may often be unachievable in my field. But technical excellence remained vitally important to me. I would discard blurred, grainy, unsatisfactory images even when the subjects were of great interest. I still do not care for the "arty" effects of grain, and find all contrived and badly composed "creative" efforts very tiresome. This is, of course, my own personal predilection, and those who are aspiring to be innovative and different may disagree with me.²

By accidentally becoming a photographer because of his social and political convictions, the self-conscious intellectual and artistic awareness he brought to his work immediately set it apart from most of the work being done in India at the time. Janah's involvement with the national struggle, right from the beginning of his career as an artist, puts his body of work in a unique position, matched only perhaps by contemporary literature. Sunil Janah gained quick recognition outside Party circles for the quality of his work, which started appearing regularly in *The Statesman* and the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, other than the Party publications. Much of the work published in the *Weekly* came from the various photographic societies all over India, the members of which followed a romantic, pictorialist style of work strongly derived from similar work being done in Britain. While Janah knew many of these photographers and their work, he was conscious of his work being very different. 'Many people thought it fashionable to be dismissive of this work, but I never was. I never wanted to do similar work myself, with manipulated or solarized images, but appreciated images that had an aesthetic content.' He was obviously very conscious of the subject of his work. The early bodies of work he produced in the forties as a twenty-something – the Famines, the aftermath of the Royal Indian Mutiny in 1946, the portraits of political personalities, peasant revolts-led him to the slow realisation that he was producing a lasting document of momentous happenings and figures. In terms of style, much of this work was in the 'heroic Left' mode – shot from a low angle looking up, which tended to give a mythic dimension to the subject. When asked how aware he was of this as a deliberate stylistic device, Janah says that the twin lens Rolleiflex camera itself dictated this style which involved shooting from the waist up. But he had also seen the films of Eisenstein and Pudovkin and the German filmmakers and said that the look was also in the air at the time. While Janah travelled around India photographing peasant and labour meetings, he was able to photograph the villagers and their lives on his own time. PC Joshi encouraged him to do this and many of these photographs were used in *People's War*. The photograph of the bare-breasted peasant sowing in Malabar appears on the cover of this issue in 1943. The Janah images here - the Mysore Dussehra, Sikh peasants, young girls in Bengal - are an early example of the cultural construct - 'Unity in Diversity' -which became a cornerstone of the national movement. It is obvious that the bare breasts were not an issue at all as over much of India both the men and women wore a single garment at the time. We would be astonished if a Party publication printed a picture like that now! Janah's images are paired with a poem by poet Kaifi Azmi in English translation

addressed to the Gandhi-Jinnah talks happening then in Bombay in an attempt to avoid the partition of India. This newspaper page is an iconic image of the cultural aspiration and ambition of the time.

Chitraprasad, Bombay

On Pages 6-7
ILLUSTRATED STORY OF GANDHI-JINNAH MEETING

OUR GREAT PEOPLE



Quintessence



A peasant beauty from Malabar

PEOPLE'S WAR

VOL. IV, NO. 11 MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 1934 No. 2

To Gandhiji And Jinnah Saheb

Not till you have blotted out the scars of hope deferred,
Not till you have unfurled the banners of resistance,
You have met—be it auspicious, the day of your dying together!
Not till you have met the scars of victory,

Rise.
This decade is no debate; it is the crucible of our perdition or salvation.
Even the air with tremulous banners quakes, for life itself broods
in the breast;
Whether destiny shall finger or Spring shall come, the outcome
is in your hands.

The voices lightning-bolts to pass, the drifting dust is immensal;
Sometimes the birds are shaken with passion, sometimes the fowls
GOOE, WEE, SQUEAL,
In these evanescent quavers of the birds and fowls, the garden has
turned into a hell;
Not till you have taken counsel how each may make beautiful life
own Kingdom,
Rise!

In language slips the hoarded treasure of colour and light are
being dropped;
By accident the flower-leaf is dropped of her proud innocence;
Among the thorns the sun of all beauty is dropped.
The truth of growing life is chased, the heart-beats of the garden
are dying,
Pinks expire, flowers perished, June perils, life is the last
convulsion.

From the day when half the angels-birds were cooped,
Autumn has laid waste over the garden,
In the name of this rusted garden—
Not till you have shaken the gates of adversity,
Rise.

Today the living world moves with changed eyes, bright with
revolutions;
From the horizons rags of light flout, shedding the hoar of triumph;
A new dawn is setting crimson into the wrong shell of dreams.

How long, this too much darkness? How long, this life of shadows?
How long shall this dead rule of empty and language be forced
to survive?
How long shall Indians lie in bonds? How long shall India be a
slave?
—Only when you have straggled out the waste steps down from
thrust to fist,
Rise!

[We offer the eleven poems by Kulkarni (original in Urdu) in our
Dumchur greetings to Gandhiji and Mr. Jinnah—Editor]



Photos
by Saad Jinnah

Bengal children smile thus—before the famine.



Ground Sikh khans—they make Punjab India's granary.

A turning point was his meeting with the already famous American photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White, who came to shoot in India for *Life* magazine. When Margaret Bourke-White met Sunil Janah in his room at the Communist Party headquarters in Bombay in 1945, he was 26 and she was 36. She was one of the most famous photographers in the world at the time. She sought out Janah to accompany her on her assignments as he was the most famous photographer in India then. They hit it off immediately and Sunil has said that he realised their way of working was very similar “she was a more advanced version of myself and had been working for much longer.” Ironically, her magazine budget came in handy when she accompanied Sunil and Shankar on their Party work through the famine hit areas of Andhra Pradesh and Mysore. Bourke-White hired a car and driver, could pay for first class train tickets and also carried tinned food for emergencies. More importantly, she gave rolls of film to Sunil, whose Party budget was very limited. Bourke-White liked to work with a big Linhof camera on a tripod and shot 4” X 5” negatives. She used a flash gun with bulb flashes, often placed off-camera, to one side of the subject. Janah’s Leica did not have a flash synching mechanism and they worked out an ingenious and unique system for him to also take flash pictures indoors. After she set up her subjects, lights and camera, she would sign to Sunil who would be to one side with his camera. In the low light, he would open his shutter on the ‘bulb’ setting, say “Ok Peggy” to her, and she would fire her flash. He would then shut his shutter ! Her flash would expose his film at the very same instant as it exposed hers ! I know of no other example of two photographers making pictures together like this ! There are two chapters on her travels with Janah in her remarkable book of reportage and photographs *Halfway to Freedom* - A report on the new India in the words and photographs of Margaret Bourke - White, published by Simon and Schuster in New York in 1949. The photographs are beautifully reproduced in richly toned photogravure.

P.C. Joshi teamed me with her to travel all over India in 1945-46, and I worked with her again during the Partition when she returned. On her second trip I had gone to Noakhali and we photographed the Calcutta riots – she took me into the Muslim areas in the middle of the riots and said she would pass me off as an American Black in case we were questioned, and not to speak Bengali! In fact, until I worked with Bourke-White, I always had a regret that I was turning into a photographer in spite of myself. I had half an eye towards journalism. She made me realise that photography could say something equally strong. In fact I was saying it already, but I didn’t know I was! Her enthusiasm

for the medium was infectious, and after that, there was no turning back. When we met we immediately became very close friends because I found I had a similar style and approach – I felt she was an advanced replica of myself – she had done it longer, she was more famous, more successful. In fact she was the most famous photographer of her time. She was 36 and I was 26.³

To see Janah's pictures and those of Bourke-White side by side is a revelation. The astonished reaction of ordinary Indians to a young, attractive, short-haired white woman in pants and boots is apparent in every picture of hers. Standing aside, Janah captures a totally different mood. These paired pictures are worthy of a show and a book on their own. Janah developed a distaste for continuing to photograph disasters like famines. He began to feel that it was an intrusion into the grief of the victims. He was also becoming increasingly disillusioned by the Party – reacting to the more doctrinaire elements within it. 'As long as I was left alone to do my back page, I was fine, but then when they started demanding a red flag waving in every picture, I got very annoyed. The last straw came when they actually cut out flags and stuck them on the pictures!' Janah started spending more time in Calcutta towards 1946-47 and finally moved back there. He had also left the Party by this time. Janah feels that whatever assessment has been made of him as a photographer has overemphasised the forties phase, which actually is only a part of a much larger body of work.

The CPI leadership changed soon after the country became independent. P.C. Joshi had formulated a policy of,

All out aid to the Nehru government', aligning his party with the socialist Left, as opposed to the Right wing of the ruling Congress Party. This policy was splashed in a banner headline across the front page of our Party paper. But Joshi met with strong opposition from the more radical members of the Communist Party and was later expelled, along with most of his close associates, like myself, from the Party. The Party later split into two the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPM), and the CPI. Although the liberal wing, that is the CPI, eventually rehabilitated Joshi, he never regained the authority he had when he was secretary of the undivided Party, I, and many others like me, were offered re-admission, but I did not rejoin.⁴

He opened a studio and started doing commercial work in Calcutta. This is also the period in which he began to photograph dancers, becoming one of the important documentors of the dance revival. He was approached by my grandmother, dancer Ragini Devi because of his repu-

tation, and became a dance photographer. Balasaraswati, Shanta Rao, Indrani Rahman and Ritha Devi were all photographed by him, and his extended work on Shanta Rao is a remarkable record of a legendary dancer, in the days before any filmed records of these performers existed. This is one aspect of his work little known to those outside the dance community. Another case of being in the right place at the right time, he photographed these dancers just when these classical forms were being rediscovered and presented to urban audiences in newly independent India. Shunned by the British, these forms became a part of the 'Nehruvian Modern' project of the construction of the new culture in the the 1950s. These photos by Janah were a key document of that moment in dance. Finally having to earn a living in Calcutta after his Communist Party days, Janah was perfectly positioned to get assignments to photograph the new 'Temples of Modern India' - the new steel plants, coal mines, car factories and jute mills being built in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. For these assignments he bought a larger format Horseman camera and made dramatic pictures of these factories when they were the pride of the new nation. Influenced by the industrial photographs made in the US by Margaret Bourke-White, these were strikingly graphic and modernist, quite different from his humanist portraits of our ordinary folk. Again, he happened to be in the right place at the right time. The full body of Janah's work turned out to be an unparalleled epic document of the India of the 1940s and 1950s.

A maturing vision of the photograph as a 'human document' led him to another major project influenced by the anthropologist Verrier Elwin - documenting the tribals of India. This had already started in the Communist Party when he travelled documenting Party outreach in tribal communities and continued after under United Nations assignments for Unesco. Covering almost all the major tribes and regions, this collection is unique in its innocent appreciation of a tradition and a people who were then less overwhelmed by the pressures of the economic scene and by the weight of outside demands of an exploding population on their unspoilt environments. Janah's tribal pictures have an obvious delight in the discovery of an innocent and open lifestyle, deeply rooted in the rhythms of nature and geography. They revel in the simple activities of daily life and document the rituals, shrines and dances of these societies. Janah didn't bring an anthropological background to this project - he didn't record the myths, didn't collect the art - he simply reacted with his camera. The scale and scope of this document is truly remarkable. This was a time when these little-known communities were being rediscovered by the rest of India. Just before I curated the big Sunil Janah exhibit in

New York in 1998, I had told theatre director Habib Tanvir in Bhopal that I was going to do the show. Habib got very excited and told me how huge an impact those photographs of the people and tribes of our country had made on all the writers and actors of IPTA. He told me that the photos of the Madhya Pradesh tribes had directly informed his decision to work with the folk theatre communities of Chhattisgarh which led to the creation of his legendary group Naya Theatre. He also told me to do interviews with surviving members of IPTA like Dina Pathak, Kaifi Azmi, Ali Sardar Jafri and many others - on the impact that Janah's work had on their own practices - an oral history of that heroic cultural moment. I applied for funding for various agencies but was unsuccessful in my endeavour. All those figures have now long passed away.

The importance of Janah's work as visual history is that his vision is that of an insider. His photographs are not those of a press reporter reporting on assignment from outside the movement (like Bourke-White) but are the record of his own political, social and cultural convictions. His huge body of portraits of the politicians, poets, writers and intellectuals he interacted with during those years complete the visual epic which he ended up creating. This was the result of the visionary P.C. Joshi pushing him to realise his creative talent and giving him the support of the Party as also the political and social theory which enabled him to construct his practice with rare rigour, empathy and sharpness. His work is unique in photography history because of the enormous breadth it contains in almost every genre of photography – any one of which could have been the life-work of a photographer – and is a culturally important landmark in the history of the Progressive Cultural Movement.

Notes

1,2,3,4 Text narrative written by Janah for the exhibition *Sunil Janah: Photographing India*, Gallery 678, New York, 1998 curated by Ram Rahman.

Other quotes in the text are from interviews given to Ram Rahman between 1995 and 1998.