Documentary Photography, Decolonization, and the Making of "Secular Icons": Reading Sunil Janah's Photographs from the 1940s through the 1950s

Ranu Roychoudhuri

Abstract

Through historicizing photographs made by celebrated Indian photographer Sunil Janah (1918–2012), this paper will elucidate the ways in which Janah created "secular icons" of historical moments during India's passage from the colonial to the postcolonial. I will primarily focus on two sets of Janah's photographs: the first set is from the 1940s, and centers on the Bengal Famine of 1943, communal violence, and the displacement of population before and after the partition of 1947, while the second set is from the 1950s, and emphasizes in particular photo-documentations of independent India's industrial growth during the first two five-year plans. Contrast between these two sets will focus on two distinct ways of becoming iconic, while also highlighting the politics of revival/retrospection and the ways in which particular genres of photographs are memorialized, while others remain relatively unknown. Later day viewers of Janah's photographs have seen only the political import of his pre-independence photographs of the Bengal Famine (1943) and the post-Partition mass exodus, while I argue for a seamless continuity between Janah's pre-Independence social-documentation and post-independence industrial photography. I further contend that Janah's photographs were material traces of an indubitable reality that embodied and at the same time exceeded their ideological message.

Sunil Janah (1918–2012) was one of the most celebrated documentary photographers in mid-twentieth-century India. He was a master photojournalist, a sympathetic observer of the process of decolonization in India, and, I claim, one of the pioneers of industrial photography—indeed a politically and aesthetically radical industrial

Ranu Roychoudhuri, School of Historical Studies, Nalanda University, Rajgir, District Nalanda, Bihar 803116, India.
E-mail: ranu@nalandauniv.edu.in

photographer. In his long and illustrious career Janah worked across different photographic genres. He began as a documentary photographer in the Communist Party of India (CPI) during the 1943 Bengal Famine and documented historically significant events, including the communal violence of 1946 and the partition of India in 1947, until he was expelled from the party in 1949. During the 1950s and the 1960s, he worked as an industrial photographer, documented various tribes in India, photographed Indian classical dancers and dance forms, and made images of Indian temple architecture (Janah, 1949, 1979, 2003; Karlekar, 2013). From the 1940s through the 1970s, Janah's photographs circulated widely especially through the CPI organ *Peoples' War* (later *Peoples' Age*)[1] and in other influential magazine and newspapers like *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and *The Statesman*.[2] Contemporary socio-political events shaped the making and the reception of his photographs as much as the images themselves shaped popular perception of those events. His works were regularly exhibited within India and abroad.[3] Exhibitions of Janah's works that treated them as visual history continued, though intermittently, after he emigrated abroad in 1980.

By the late 1970s Janah was no longer the most celebrated and sought-after documentary photographer in India.[4] Nevertheless, his photographs had already made their way from newspapers and magazines into the collections of premier cultural institutions. Although Janah's photographs were detached from their original context in the move from popular press to gallery spaces, the public perception of the images did not change. His works were still considered an important milestone in the history of development of photography in India, but they were not perceived as works of art. Janah was considered an important documentary photographer, but *only* a documentary photographer. Janah's photographs were featured as part of the Festival of India in 1982 in the United Kingdom (Janah, 2013, p. 96). They were the focus of a 1996 show at the Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts (IGNCA) from their permanent collection. Janah's works also appeared alongside 21 other photographers in the exhibition titled *India: A Celebration of Independence, 1947–1997*, curated by Michael E. Hoffman from Aperture Foundation on behalf of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.[5]

These exhibitions laid the ground for a seminal transformation in the reception of Janah's works. In 1998 Delhi-based photographer-activist Ram Rahman curated Janah's largest retrospective show at Gallery 678 in the East Village in New York City. With exhibition prints displayed alongside his contact sheets, notes, and small prints, this show presented the creative-selective agency of the photographer while he was making the final print. Janah himself came to be seen not simply as a photojournalist, but as a politically motivated, socially committed artist. Although the category of "art" had never been invoked while Janah made the photographs, in this late 1990s moment of revival Janah's photographs came to be seen as political art objects, possessed of formal autonomy, and using specific situations to address universal messages about human conditions.

I will primarily focus on two sets of Janah's photographs that belonged to two very different photographic genres and spanned two dramatically different decades in Janah's life, and indeed in the life of the Indian subcontinent. The first set is from the 1940s, and centres on the Bengal Famine of 1943, communal violence, and the displacement of population before and after the partition of 1947. The second set is from the 1950s, in particular photo-documentations of independent India's industrial growth

during the first two five-year plans. I suggest that a juxtaposition of these two sets of photographs will illuminate two specific ways in which Janah created "secular icons" of historical moments during India's passage from the colonial to the postcolonial.[6] Contrast between these two sets will also highlight the politics of revival/retrospection and the ways in which particular genres of photographs are memorialized, while others remain relatively unknown.

I have borrowed the category "secular icon" from historian of photography Vicky Goldberg, who was familiar with Janah's work and was the biographer of Janah's famous collaborator Margaret Bourke-White. Goldberg defined "secular icons" as "… representations that inspire some degree of awe—perhaps mixed with dread, compassion, or aspiration—and that stand for an epoch or a system of belief." According to her not all photographs have signification beyond their denotative meaning. She distinguished iconic photographs as

> …. images…[that] almost instantly acquired symbolic overtone and larger frames of reference that endow them with national or even world wide significance. They concentrate the hopes and fears of millions and provide an instant and effortless connection to some deeply meaningful moment in history. (Brink, 2000, pp. 137–138; Goldberg, 1991, p. 135)

Goldberg had four assumptions while defining photographs as "secular icons": first, the language of photography is universal; second, photographs are free-standing objects to be encountered; third, popular discourse presumes that photographs possess authenticity; fourth, photographs can be powerful symbols. While reading photographs from liberated Nazi concentration camps, Cornelia Brink—referring to Goldberg's work—argued for two more aspects that transform photographs into "secular icons": "canonization" and "revealing and veiling." Canonization happens by showing photographs "over and over again" for multiple purposes; the simultaneous "revealing and veiling" happens through abstraction and generalization away from the particulars of the subjects photographed. According to Brink, these kinds of secular "icons … provide no hint of any specific time and place and 'anonymize' human beings…placing them within aesthetic pictorial traditions" (Brink, 2000, p. 138). This "revealing and veiling" further happens, according to Brink, because "secular icons" of horror *only allude* to the actual event and do not *actually* represent the event. Such photographs do "allude to" in the sense of capturing indubitable indexical marks of having-been-there. But they do not necessarily convey the meaning of the photographic event. The idea of "secular icon" is useful for reading Janah's photographs, even though neither Goldberg's nor Brink's characterizations fully apply to Janah's photographs of the 1943 Famine, when they first came to public view.

My usage of "secular" to understand the iconicity of documentary photography during decolonization has two distinct purposes: first, I am employing "secular" as a marker of non-religious icons, given that "icon" not only signifies a semiotic relationship but also suggests a visual genre in Eastern Christianity; second, I distinguish the secularity of documentary photography from the ideological Secularism of modernist art practices in mid-twentieth-century India. Especially in post-independence India, gallery-oriented arts were expected to be explicitly, ideologically Secular to uphold the political values of the newly formed republic—"secular," "Indian," and "modern."

These art forms used religio-historical or folk iconography to create an "Indian modern" that embraced Secularism as an ideology.[7] In contrast, documentary photography in the 1940s and 1950s just happened to be secular—it typically did not concern itself with either explicitly rejecting or explicitly accepting the domain of the religio-cultural-spiritual, and was not burdened with the obligation to become self-consciously secular. These two different engagements with the secular can be attributed to the fact that documentary photography during decolonization was not considered a serious art form, and therefore not a site of artistic Modernism in India. Seen positively, this distinction constituted the cultural-ideological independence of these two kinds of representational practices, namely photography and fine arts. The corollary of this claim of independence is that Indian documentary photography during decolonization was not preoccupied with formulating a visual vocabulary that would be "Indian" and "modern." The category "secular icon" vis-à-vis *only* "icon" is therefore useful not only for explaining Janah's photographs, but also points toward the aesthetic autonomy of documentary photography from other artistic practices.

In an absence of sustained historicization of photography of this period, scholars too have located the medium within the rhetoric of artistic modernism in India. Such characterization of photography, I contend, arises from a contemporary perspective on the medium whose aesthetic status as high art is firmly established. This presentist understanding of photography often forecloses the fact that photography, more specifically documentary photography, in mid-twentieth-century India was yet to become an art. It therefore seems inappropriate to analyze Janah's works, and more generally documentary photography, through the analytical framework employed by many art historians to understand visual Modernism in India.[8] As I have mentioned before, it was only in the 1990s that Janah was recognized as a socially committed artist. It would be unproductive to project that artistic status back into the 1940s and the 1950s when analyzing the ways in which the Janah photographs circulated through the press in those decades. His photographs were not canon-creating artistic icons produced in the gallery; they were icons of the everyday generated through mass circulation. Thus "secular icon" in Janah's photographs stands in opposition, if anything at all, to the sacred "aura" of unique-art-in-the-gallery consecrated through "secularized ritual."[9]

Janah's photographs were seen uncritically as a "window into the world"; they were seen as "true" depictions of their referents with fixed meanings. However, it is important to bear in mind that photographs circulated through the press did not reach their audience as stand-alone images, but as images embedded within verbal texts and other non-photographic images. Even when not appearing in the press, documentary photographs are accompanied by extended captions that often contribute to the perception of their truth-value. Unlike paintings or sculptures with titles, press photographs with definitive captions often limit the possibility of subjective interpretation.[10] The indexical quality of photographs also contributes to the ways in which they are seen differently from fine arts. Thus in terms of their aesthetic status, their modes of circulation, and their patterns of reception the photographs I discuss—photographs often coming out of everyday seeing but certainly not unmediated—had their own aesthetic autonomy;[11] they embody an "an aesthetic that calls for its own criteria of evaluation and terms of analysis" (Guha Thakurta, 2015, p. 21).[12]

Pre-1947 Aesthetics of "Social Documentation": Famine, Riots, and Refugees

Although Janah began his photographic career with the CPI, he was well aware that "the communist party was not really interested in [his] photographic activity as such, but was more interested in the political life of the country" (S. Janah, personal interview, June 2011). But he also added that under the leadership of P.C. Joshi, he was given the liberty to make whatever photographs he wanted. He had that freedom of thought because, as he recollected,

> …the Party angle depends on the activities and the leader you serve under. I served under P.C. Joshi and thus was not a doctrinarian. P.C. Joshi was an immensely liberal human being and even communism as a doctrine allowed me to photograph whatever I liked. P. C. Joshi would never say, "Oh, you should not have taken that." Absolutely rigid doctrinarian point of view was never imposed on me and like Joshi I could harness my liberal point of view while remaining in the CPI. (S. Janah, personal interview, June 2011)

Mentored by Joshi, Janah was a non-doctrinaire radical, preserving his own voice and not adhering to any rigid ideological dispensation—political or otherwise. When asked if his camerawork could be considered a form of visual activism he replied, "the word 'activism' was not there but I was definitely an activist. Becoming a member of CPI implied activism" (S. Janah, personal interview, June 2011). Janah expressed his left liberal politics through photographing some of the most important events in the history of modern India. He documented the catastrophic events of the 1940s and meetings of political parties, and made portraits of important political leaders and public personalities like Gandhi and Nehru. Besides, he photographed the mundane lives of ordinary people; these photographs depicted daily lives of ordinary people and crowds gathered on the occasions of public events and public mourning. Liberty of thought and expression encouraged Janah to make his photographs more than mere propaganda for the CPI. Thus Janah's photographs of famines, communal violence, and of refugees made during his CPI days were not simple agitprop (like many of Chittaprosad's sketches from the late 1940s) and had a *je ne sais quoi* that made many of Janah's images survive in the collective memory of Indians; they pricked the conscience of beholders in multiple ways and became "secular icons" in modern India.

Janah's photographs did not always conform to Goldberg's insistence that "secular icons" should be free standing images of anonymous subjects. In *People's War* and in his collection of sketches titled *Hungry Bengal* (1943), Chittaprosad, who traveled with Janah during the Famine, often named the people the duo depicted.[13] These subjects of sketches and photographs were not entirely anonymous representation of an abstract suffering humanity. Janah's photographs did not come to public view as freestanding objects; they were accompanied in the newspaper *People's War* by Chittaprosad's sketches and long articles by various people on the "famine situation" in rural Bengal and elsewhere (Figures 1 and 2). Thus initially Janah's photographs were being read in relationship to other forms of visual and written texts. His photographs were used as evidence and appeared in the press as visual verification of Joshi's or S. S. Batlivala's written reports and as "realist" equivalences of Chittaprosad's figurative abstract sketches. Despite this embeddedness in the structure of the newspaper the images
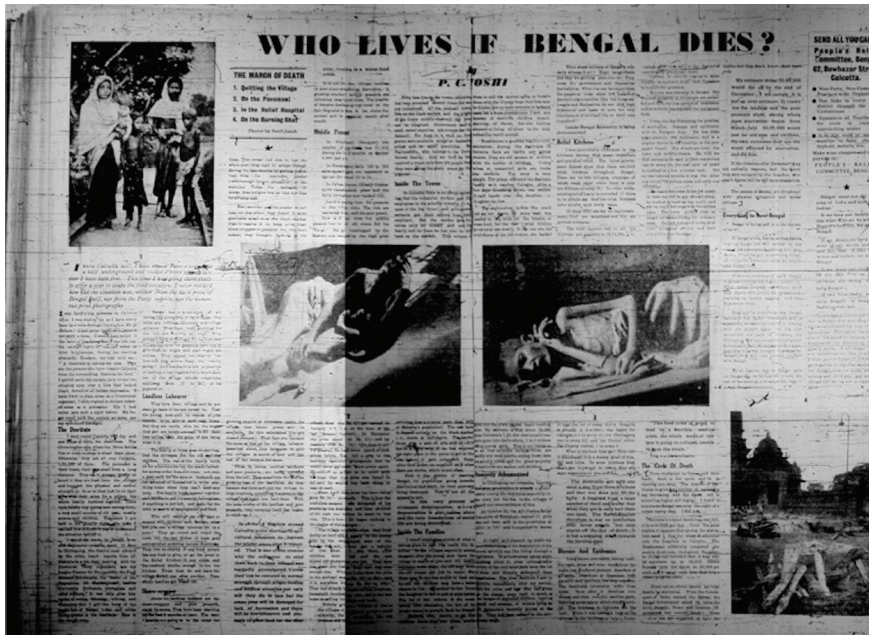
Figure 1. "Special Bengal Number," *People's War*, November 7, 43
Courtesy: Center for Research Libraries, Chicago.

Figure 2. *People's War*, January 23, 1944
Courtesy: Center for Research Libraries, Chicago.

became iconic. Soon the photographs and sketches overpowered the written texts. The graphic depictions of the famine "created a sensation" (Janah, 2013, p. 10).[14] Janah's photographs became iconic because they depicted "deeply meaningful moment in history," "stood for an epoch," "acquired symbolic overtone," and were of "national and world wide significance." The iconic character of Janah's photographs was further fostered through the CPI held community exhibitions in major cities throughout India. Based on the publications in the *People's War* and titled *Hungry Bengal*, the exhibitions showcased Janah's photographs and Chittaprosad's sketches.[15] Janah's photographs were also made into postcards and were send abroad to raise funds.

Janah's photographs of the famine became the point of reference for Indian public discussions on the power of photographic visuals to portray universal human suffering (i.e., not just Bengali or Indian suffering) and to provoke public response. As late as 1977, newspaper reports on later natural and man-made calamities that had nothing to do with the Bengal Famine referred to Janah's photographs from the 1940s.[16] The fact that Janah's photographs became icons of human suffering can be gleaned from the social lives of his photographs. For example, two of his images of the Famine that were published in *People's War* in 1945 (Figure 3) were republished in 1954 in the *Illustrated Weekly of India* (Figure 4) as a "striking [photo] study" titled "The Dispossessed" (Janah, 1954).[17] By abstracting the photographs from their original context and adding the word "dispossessed" the editor suggested that the Famine photographs represented the post-Partition mass exodus. The despair portrayed in these photographs was transformed into a signifier of universal distress, which can also represent the trauma of the Partition (see Figures 5, 3, and 4).

The photographs in the "Special Bengal Number" of *People's War* established Janah as a professional photojournalist, in which he received his first byline (Figures 1 and 6).[18] In his interviews with me and also in his writings, Janah constantly regretted that he became famous out of other people's miseries. However, Janah's photographs of the famine were the first of their kind in the history of photography in India. Famine in India was nothing new, but Janah's compassionate portrayal of the victims was something the newspaper reading public in India had never seen before.[19] It was not only the brutal reality, but also visual arrangements within frames that increased the impact of his photographs. According to Sobha Janah, while documenting, "Sunil expressed his point of view," while "also [infusing] certain ideas of composition, placement, etc., which perhaps other documentary photographers during that time would not have 'wasted' time in doing" (Sobha Janah, personal interview, June 2011).[20] A fusion of his political ideology and his attention to formal aesthetics made Janah's photographs distinct.

Sunil Janah often gave the human suffering that he was documenting a distinctive aesthetic expression. An obvious comparison can be made to the vast number of colonial official and Western travelers' photographs that aestheticized the Indian poor. More than merely conforming to any available visual tradition of aestheticizing and often fetishizing the poor, however, Janah's primary interest was to empathize with human lives, in this case with the famine victims. When considering composition, arrangement of subjects within frames, and other such formal qualities in photographs, I therefore want to avoid over-emphasizing any formalism that overlooks the human condition in question.[21]

Figure 3. Janah's Photographs of the Famine in *People's Age*, July 28, 1946

Courtesy: Center for Research Libraries, Chicago

Figure 4. Janah's Phototgraph of the Famine in *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, July 25, 1954

Courtesy: The British Library, London.

Figure 5. Sunil Janah, Famine in Andhra Pradesh, 1944

© Sunil Janah
Courtesy: Arjun Janah.

The dramatic, even twisted, body language of Janah's human subjects is immediately apparent. It conveys their emotional states of deprivation and despair. However, I want to call attention to two other aspects of Janah's formal arrangement. One of the signature formal styles of Janah, I would say, is tight framing. He depicted all his subjects in their entirety but allowed very little breathing space within the photograph. Societal injustice and oppression, which prompted Janah to join the communist party, was conveyed formally in his photographs through these tight framings. Seeing his photographs in the newspaper spread may suggest an editorial hand in cropping his photographs. But as with his practice, the CPI did not interfere with the ways in which Janah's photographs would be published. Janah's photographs, especially during the 1940s, were not cropped for the sake of the news-spread layout. In cases where the newspaper version of a photograph appears to be cropped when compared with an exhibition print it was Janah himself who exercised his discretion as the photographer to crop images. He often deliberately chose to "confine" his subjects within a tight composition to convey their entrapment.

Figure 6. "Special Bengal Number," *People's War*, November 7, 1943

Courtesy: Center for Research Libraries, Chicago.

The other strategy was to highlight the gaze of his living human subjects. Some of his living subjects, like the woman in Figure 7, look directly at the camera and thereby directly at the viewer as if inviting the viewers into the photograph. Alternatively, Janah framed his photographs so there is little space between the gaze of his human subjects and the edge of the frame, which dramatically cut off their field of vision (Figures 8 and 5).

Some of these strategies are not unique to Janah. Direct gaze is one of the common strategies adopted in photojournalism and documentary photography, dating back to Jacob Riis in the late nineteenth-century United States. More recently, the celebrated Indian photographer Raghu Rai focused on subjects' gaze during the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971) to make photographs charged with the intensity of the event photographed.[22] But the remarkable aspect of Janah's photographs are the ways in which he coupled the tight framing, gazes, and body languages to convey the limits of his photographic subjects' alternatives.

Close readings of Janah's photographs from different periods and different events illustrate his framing strategy. A photograph from 1943 of a famine stricken impoverished mother and child on a Calcutta sidewalk is symptomatic of Janah's visual style and was one of his first publications in *People's War* (Figures 1 and 9). It is a visually striking, horizontally oriented rectangular photograph with a calculated play of light and shadow. The mother and the feeding child are arranged along the diagonal. The light source is at the corner nearer to the mother's head. An obstruction, most likely a tree, bifurcates the light beam. Light falls on the human bodies highlighting *only* the elevated parts of the figures; the figures are devoid of much anatomical detail.

Figure 7. Famine in Andhra Pradesh, 1944
© Sunil Janah
Courtesy: Arjun Janah.

Figure 8. Sunil Janah, Famine in Andhra Pradesh, 1944

© Sunil Janah
Courtesy: Arjun Janah.

Figure 9. Sunil Janah, Mother and Child on a Street in Calcutta during the Bengal Famine, 1943

© Sunil Janah
Courtesy: Arjun Janah.

However, the shadows suggest the parts of the body that we do not see clearly, and masterfully drape the female body. The juxtaposition of light and shadow suggest that the woman was nursing her baby, but we do not see the actual act of feeding or the breasts. Separated by the wide black shadow, the second light beam falls somewhat parallel to the human figures on the upper part of the frame; this illuminated upper part of the image mimics the human shape. The woman is looking upwards. But multiple layers of light and shadow restrict her gaze—first the wide black shadow, followed by the illuminated-crisscrossed section, and finally the dark edge. The light and shadow and the four edges of the photograph confine the human bodies, as if forcing them to remain in their positions, as if the photographic subjects do not have any hope of redress.

A second photograph (Figures 1 and 10), of a destitute family at the moment they were leaving their village in Chittagong, was first published on the same page with the photograph of mother and child. This image of the starving family is not as stylized as the photograph of the mother and child on the Calcutta sidewalk. This is a rather simple group photograph of a starving family of man, wife, and their three emaciated children. The photograph has no foreground and the human figures stand at the lower edge of the photograph. The family has nowhere to walk forward; they cannot go back to the faded, out-of-focus pathway behind. In the present of the photographic moment, the wooden bridge on which the family stands metaphorically connects their past and their future. They are restricted within the bridge by the two slightly elevated sides. All the members of the family, excepting the little one in the woman's arm, look at the camera directly. However, the adults have accepted their destiny, while the children look much more fearful of their unknown future.

Obviously both the photographs look very different when seen within the newspaper and when they are abstracted from their newspaper context and read as autonomous visual objects (Figures 1, 9, and 10). Many of the formal features, like direct gaze and composition, often get lost in newspaper spreads due to low-quality printing, smaller size, and overarching presence of the written text. Formal qualities of such photographs become secondary to the immediacy of photo reportage inspired by political commitment. Janah often cropped his photographs differently for newspapers and for exhibition prints. For example, the photograph of the destitute family reproduced in Figure 10 is an exhibition print that had a different crop for newspaper publication, as shown in Figure 1. As I mentioned previously, there was no editorial hand in the cropping and Janah was free to make his own aesthetic choices. Janah's decision to crop the photograph differently reflected his intention to print in the newspaper, which often differed from his later thoughts when preparing the exhibition prints that are included in *Photographing India* and those used in this article.[23] There are two striking differences between the newspaper version (Figure 1) and the exhibition print (Figure 10). First, the background in the newspaper version does not have the faded pathway that presumably the family had traveled over. Second, the newspaper version has substantial foreground and the human figures are not standing—as they are in the exhibition print—at the lower edge of the photograph. From the newspaper version it appears as if the family is even more hemmed in because the two side edges of the photograph seem to press the man and the women from the two sides. However, with these two substantial differences, my analysis of tight framing and direct gaze also holds in the case of the newspaper version of the photograph.[24]

Figure 10. Sunil Janah, A Muslim Family Leaving their Village near Chittagong—now in Bangladesh–during the Bengal Famine, 1943–1944

© Sunil Janah
Courtesy: Arjun Janah.

Apart from formal elements, a discussion of publication history may help us understand the ways in which photographic icons are produced. For example, Janah traveled with Margaret Bourke-White during two of her three visits to India. Together—but for different purposes—they documented the lives of people who were victims of hunger, poverty, and communal rage (Figure 11). Yet conditions of production and the pattern of circulation of Bourke-White's photographs of the Calcutta Riots contributed to the specific ways in which her photographs would become "secular icons" of human suffering charged with universality. Indeed, Goldberg used Bourke-White's images, though not the photographs from India but those from liberated Nazi camps, to illustrate her point (Goldberg, 1991).

Figure 11. Margaret Bourke-White, the Day after Great Calcutta Killing/Direct Action Day (August 16, 1946)

© *Life*

Courtesy: Life Photo Archive hosted by Google.

Bourke-White's photographs appear very different when encountered in different publication formats, like *Life* magazine or in the book *Halfway to Freedom*, and when they are seen independently. But when they were first published in *Life*, the reading public, in India and abroad, encountered Bourke-White's photograph in a different format than those of Janah's photographs, which were first published in a communist party newspaper suffering from a shortage of funds. For example, Janah's photographs suffered from lack of clarity because they were printed in small size on low-quality newsprint and sometimes had to conform to column width constraints; Bourke-White's photographs, on the other hand, were printed on high quality non-photographic glossy paper and were blown up to a size that allowed beholders to see every detail.

Bourke-White's photographs (Figure 11) could be published because unlike many British publications, the American magazine *Life* did not consider the images inappropriate for public viewing. *Life* cabled "your vulture pictures simply magnificent" while Associated Press (AP) informed their photographer Max Desfors that "[y]our bodies inedible for British Consumption."[25] Bourke-White's photograph of *Calcutta Vultures* after the Direct Action Day of August 15, 1946 was allotted one whole page in *Life* and two-thirds of another for one single photograph (Figure 12). The large photographs were accompanied by two quarter-size photographs; one of living Calcuttans with their noses covered to avoid the stench of dead bodies and the other a zoom in on the behavior of a row of vultures, who were sitting on the roof of a *kachha* house.

Similar to the British press—but for different reasons I believe—very few photographs of slaughtered human bodies appeared in Indian newspapers reporting the communal violence. Instead of publishing photographs of atrocities, Indian newspapers focused on the peace rallies and communal harmony. Most of Janah's published photographs too were of rallies advocating communal harmony rather than of slaughtered human bodies. Among a handful of photographs Janah made of mutilated human bodies, only one image (Figure 13) was much later made into an exhibition print.

Four decades after the photographs were made, Goldberg characterized Janah's photographs as "not necessarily better or worse but wholly different in approach,"

Figure 12. Margaret Bourke-White's Photographs of Communal Violence in *Life,* September 9, 1946

© *Life*
Courtesey: Google Books.

while comparing camera works of the two photographers, especially their photographs of the same subjects.[26] Goldberg continued,

> The American knew how to make monumental and memorable images, full of dignity, sorrow and a formal air of permanence: temporary images elevated to mythic stature. The Indian was frequently more informal and candid … (Goldberg, 1998, p. 36)

She further elaborated,

> They were photographing from different personal positions and for different audiences… Bourke-White's bold, static, iconic images were an effective form of shorthand to sum up major events in a photo essay for a public that knew little of the place or people. Mr. Janah's style…tended to be looser … and intimate …. this worked well for people who were living the events themselves and could readily identify the signs… (Goldberg, 1998, p. 36)

The iconicity of Janah's photographs of human suffering is difficult to explain simply by locating the images either within the history of communist movements or within the larger political scenario of India in the 1940s. But a simple formal analysis may not completely explain this iconic quality either; nor will it be sufficient to approach the

Figure 13. Sunil Janah, the Day after the Great Calcutta Killing/Direct Action Day (August 16, 1946)

© Sunil Janah
Courtesy: Arjun Janah.

photographs from the perspective of Janah's personal history. Further, Janah's conscious refusal to explain his intentions while making the photographs sheds no light on the reasons that made Janah's photographs of the 1940s iconic. Janah himself consciously refused to explain his "artistic intentionality." Indeed he sounded dismissive: "[i]t doesn't matter what I say about my photographs. More important is how you perceive them" (S. Janah, personal interview, June 2011).

When asked about the difference between his style of portraying the common people of India vis-à-vis the styles and purposes of photographers like Henri Cartier-Bresson or Margaret Bourke-White, Janah promptly referred to Vicky Goldberg's review of his 1998 New York exhibition and the ways in which the latter had emphasized the distinctive style of Janah compared to Bourke-White's as "Not better or worse, but different" (Goldberg, 1998, p. 36). According to Janah Bourke-White's style was

> purely journalistic; but that journalism was not either candid photography or pure reportage. It was something of her own style. Her photographs had an appearance of candid, but they were all staged. …. She would always do it by first setting up her camera on tripod, then putting a series of flash bulbs, then she would keep taking photographs hoping that some will be

absolutely right and they usually were because if you take too many shots some are bound to be perfect. (S. Janah, personal interview, June 2011)[27]

Most of Bourke-White's photographs of the Andhra famine (1944–1945) were "staged candid," which Goldberg too flagged as her signature style.[28] Janah elaborated on why he categorized Bourke-White's work as "purely journalistic," and the ways in which her approach was substantially different from his own. According to him "she did not have a special purpose and executed the job she was assigned to," while he was "serving an idea—the idea of communism" (S. Janah, personal interview, June 2011).

By making a distinction between Bourke-White's work and that of his own, Janah was making a distinction between the socially committed CPI documentary photographer and a photojournalist from a mainstream magazine. This assumption was premised on the fact that she was a highly paid photojournalist from the American magazine *Life* and was taking photographs for a commercial purpose. It was not her "social commitment," but her "paid assignment" that brought her to India. However, in making a distinction between Bourke-White's style and his own, Janah was not passing judgment on Bourke-White as a person.

Ethics of Post-1947 Industrial Photography: Making of a "New India" through Janah's Lens

Janah's industrial photographs from the 1950s were made after two watersheds, one in Janah's life and the other in the political life of India: the partition of 1947 and Janah's expulsion from the CPI in 1949. Janah, as he himself recounted, had high hopes for Nehru's government during the first decade after independence and had lost faith in the CPI as an institution and also as a community of like-minded people. He mentioned during our interview that after expulsion, he realized that under the new leadership, the CPI's institutional hegemony could curb his individual freedom as photographer; he could not go back to the days of the 1940s, when nobody was pressured to conform to particular doctrines (S. Janah, personal interview, June 2011).[29]

Shortly after his expulsion, Janah worked as a freelance photographer documenting the new Nehruvian industrial ventures. His first commission came from the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC) (Figure 14).[30] Modeled after the Tennessee Valley Authority, the DVC was the first multipurpose river valley project of independent India. Janah thus became the first visual chronicler of India's first river valley project. Subsequently, he was commissioned by various industrial companies dealing in heavy metal, metal ores, and coal. He worked for companies including Tata Iron and Steel Co (TISCO), Hindustan Steel Limited (HSL), Hindustan Motors (HM), Burn & Co.'s Iron and Steel Works, Dunlop Tyres, Dunlopillo Foam Rubber Mattresses, Chittaranjan Locomotive Works, Indian Aluminium Co, Sindhri Fertilizer Factory, and Bard & Co. (Figure 15) (Janah, 2013). Janah's images of individuals (miners, laborers, supervisors, engineers) and the infrastructure of these industries circulated widely through the press, especially through the *Illustrated Weekly*. These photographs often became the lead photographs or the lead photo-essays in newspapers and magazines, and the *Illustrated Weekly* featured Janah in their "Photographers of India Series."[31] Janah's photographs

Figure 14. Sunil Janah, Construction of Tilaiya Dam by DVC, 1950s

© Sunil Janah
Courtesy: Arjun Janah.

of DVC (Figure 14) and other industries were some of the earliest of the photo-documentations of post-independence state-sponsored industrial ventures that came to public view.

Janah's industrial photographs have been grossly overlooked, as scholars and curators have focused single-mindedly on his internationally famous pre-partition "social documentation."[32] To be fair, Janah himself minimized the significance of his industrial photography, devoting only two and a half pages to this subject in the 126-page posthumous autobiographical introduction to his latest collection of photographs. Even these few pages were largely a straightforward list of the industrial projects he had photographed (Janah, 2013). In my interviews with him, Janah talked eagerly about his pre-independence oeuvre while sounding disillusioned when reflecting on his post-independence industrial works, saying that he was actually ashamed of doing industrial photography. He was conflicted in his views: at one level anxious that this was merely products for a market, commissioned either by the government or by the industries, and lacking any specific socially committed purpose. On the other hand, he argued that he took on these projects inspired by his mentor Shambhu Shaha, who also did industrial photography. "I need not to be ashamed of this," Janah said to me.

Janah's ambiguity toward his industrial assignments is symptomatic of the ways in which his photographic practice was rooted deeply in a personal history, which in turn

Figure 15. Sunil Janah, Bird & Co Coalmine in Asansole, 1950s

© Sunil Janah
Courtesy: Arjun Janah.

was often shaped by the history of CPI. Arguably, the expulsion from the CPI for being a P. C. Joshi loyalist was one of the major moments of crisis in Janah's career, setting in train an anxiety he tried to resolve all his life.[33] As an analyst of his photo-texts, I see remarkable continuities between Janah's two phases—between his photographs made as a member of the CPI and the industrial photographs he made after his expulsion from the party.

Reflecting on his time with the CPI Janah wrote,

> I joined the Communist Party of India (CPI) and became involved in photographing people's struggle against poverty, injustices, and exploitation, and continued to extend that to photographing every aspect of their lives. I never found their lives joyless, in spite of their deprivation. (Janah, 2013, p. 109)

How do we reconcile this statement, and the people-oriented social commitment of the famine photographs, with Janah's photographs of the statist Nehruvian new India that prized heavy industries and hydroelectric projects (Figures 14 and 15)? It may appear that he had abandoned his radical politics as he sought to depict Nehru's vision of "temples of modern India." Indeed, his own reminiscences express his positive thoughts for Nehruvin vision of industrial development. But it will be simplistic to dismiss Janah's industrial photographs *only* as visual expressions of the dominant nationalist discourse in the post independent era. On the contrary, I argue that documenting industrialization was an essential aspect of Janah's radical politics. The radicalism that was expressed in Janah's profoundly influential pre-partition photographs continued even when he was not with the CPI and was doing industrial photography. His non-doctrinaire leftist politics allowed him to have faith both in the promises of independence and in Nehru's leadership while also maintaining a critical eye on human suffering during industrialization. He recounted later, "…I cannot be blindly patriotic and refuse to see the less attractive aspects of my country" (Janah, 2013, p. 4). While echoing Nehru's vision of India as a developing, modernizing nation, Janah never allowed his viewers to miss the under belly of industrial production and his photographs were always marked by a critique of statist narratives of industrial development.

Janah was in awe and admiration of the coming of the industrial age in India. Yet he did not simply glorify the industries, and he never overlooked the lived experiences of the laborers. He was aware that no matter how insignificant people may appear alongside enormous modern machines, industries would not be possible without human labor. Janah never lost sight of human subjects even when he was commissioned to document what he described as "monstrous machines":

> The most striking aspects of these photographs were, to me, the very modern industrial structures being built manually by primitive villagers and tribals carrying cement mixtures in pails on their heads at the worksite, where giant steel piles were being driven into the ground by even bigger machines, and monstrous earth-moving machines were roaring around. (Janah, 2013, p. 41)

Janah realized that "primitive villagers" and "modern machines" were not necessarily incompatible. Alongside the official commissions of dams and factories, Janah depicted the everyday lives of the industrial workforce, who he felt had immense courage to

fight back against deprivation and injustices (Sunil Janah and Sobha Janah, personal interview, June 2011). "[I]nfluenced by Marxist ideology," he made what he described as "heroic" "portraits of the 'proletariat', the urban industrial workers in the cities, and the peasants in the villages" (Janah, 2013, p. 23).[34] Thus, Janah's radical politics was manifested in his industrial photographs on two levels: on the one hand, he documented the monumentality of these projects as part of a Third World nation's coming into its own, while, on the other hand, he portrayed the conditions of people encountering the machines.

Further, his radical ethics manifested itself, to me, for the ways in which he always invited his viewers to interpret his photographs. As he mentioned during his interview, "[i]t doesn't matter what I say about my photographs. More important is how you perceive them" (S. Janah, personal interview, June 2011). He added that, "[p]hotographs cannot make a political statement directly, but they can arouse emotions that can be harnessed for social and political causes" (Janah, 2013, p. 110). This invitation to an ethical engagement came from his deep commitment toward his subjects. Reflecting on his photographs, Janah elaborated that he was "documenting history," while also feeling responsible toward his photographic subjects. He wanted to "confer on them some kind of immortality," they would not otherwise have (Janah, 2013, p. 110).[35] During the 1950s, visual documentation, including industrial photography, newspaper reports, documentary newsreels, celebrated the monumentality of the newly made industries. Janah tried to preserve his human subjects in this collective memory that would otherwise remember *only* industrial development without acknowledging the contribution of these nameless people. "I felt that I owed it to our people to photograph their vigor, charm, and liveliness, and the fortitude and dignity they have in spite of all their deprivation," he wrote (Janah, 2013, p. 23).

Janah was imaging Indian industrial projects at a time when other Indian photographers—including the Calcutta based advertising photographer Ahmed Ali (1922–2015) (Figure 16)—created iconic images of the promises of development.[36] Yet Ali's industrial photographs did not focus on the grim reality of the industrial workers.[37] They either portrayed happy faces of workers or used their human subjects as reference to depict the enormous scales of the industries. In his interview with me, Ahmed Ali pointed out the ways in which he never felt compelled to document the plight of the industrial work force (A. Ali, personal interview, August 2013). Ali depicted the industries in the making on the surface while Janah explored the dark underground—both literally and metaphorically. While Ali, and many like him, commemorated the monumental end products, Janah documented the less glamorous aspect of raw material extraction.

In Ali's photograph (Figure 17), we see two coal miners in hard-hats against the backdrop of a conveyer belt and a clear sky. Their positions in the photograph are carefully composed through several triangular and parallel forms, which guide the viewers' eye. The miners and the iron structure are arranged roughly in a triangle, whose base falls on the lower edge of the photograph. There are two more triangular structures at the top of the photograph. Taken together the two miners and their picks form another triangle. Again, the two laborers are standing along parallel lines to each other; the picks in their hands are parallel to each other as well, imitating the platforms of the conveyer belt. The photograph was shot from a slightly low angle to give an

Figure 16. Ahmed Ali, Tata Iron & Steel Co. Ltd. (TISCO), Jamshedpur, 1950s
© Ahmed Ali
Courtesy: Center for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.

Figure 17. Ahmed Ali, Two Miners, 1950s

© Ahmed Ali
Courtesy: Center for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.

impression of the subjects as larger than life. The human subjects in the photograph have smiling faces and are looking away toward a distant horizon. The left edge of the photograph has not restricted their gaze, rather their gaze makes the edge almost invisible. Through Ali's expert composition the photograph gains significant breathing space. Through arrangement of lines, the image becomes dynamic and conveys a sense of motion, as if industries will lead the people toward a better future. The photograph conveys a carefully constructed, conscious balance. Though Ali himself recalled that he

was not working in a socialist realist style, his photographs often give an impression of heroic proletariat – industrial workers as agents of social change (A. Ali, personal interview, September 2011). This is congruent with the fact that India's post-independence industrialization was based on the Soviet model of industrial progress.

Janah's photographs, too, have compositional affinities with contemporary global trends in industrial photography. But he used those conventions to depict more than what the conventions dictated. For example, tiny human figures did not appear in Janah's industrial landscape as simple markers of scale; human subjects were signs of mutual cooperation between man and machine—in spite of their smaller size, laborers were not insignificant. A quick comparison between these two photographs by Ali and Janah (Figures 16 and 18) show structural similarities while depicting small human figures against a backdrop of giant industries. But Ali's and Janah's comments during their interviews about their compositional choices give us clues for decoding their photographs. Janah's portrayal of human subjects up close was substantially different from that of Ali's and of other contemporary photographers. His visual strategy of tight framing and direct gaze, which he developed during the 1940s famine, reappeared in his close study of industrial workforce. Janah's and Ali's contrasting photographs of the two sets of coal miners signify different narratives the photographers were trying to emphasize (Figures 17 and 19).

Janah's photograph of coal miners (Figure 19), in contrast to Ali's aboveground, well-lit image, has an extremely tight composition conveying suffocation inside the underground pit. The absence of hard hats suggests that Janah's miners were subcontracted workers at the bottom of the hierarchy of manual laborers.[38] The composition includes a triangle, but unlike Ali's ascending triangles, Janah's triangle points downward and conveys a sense of compression. The two heads are angled away from one another and push against the edges of the picture. The elbow of the one man presses out against the frame. The single light source and the reflections on the miners' bodies and on the ceiling of the pit suggest that Janah was using a single bulb flash rather than controlled studio lighting or a reflector, and hence had less control over the photographic rendition of the arrangement. The use of harsh flash matches the harsh conditions, highlights the sweat on the bodies, and contrasts with the surrounding darkness. Unlike in Ali's photographs, these miners look directly at the camera and thereby directly at the viewers. With their expressionless faces, their cold and empty direct gaze, the miners come out of the pitch-dark background suggesting their capacity to work through adversity. The miners' direct and piercing gaze can be read as a confrontation, which encourages viewers to reflect back on the photograph. Despite the bleakness in the image, or perhaps because of it, this photograph received a full page spread in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* (Figure 20).[39]

This bleak, unsparing depiction of the workers of Nehruvian projects enabled Janah's image to grab viewers' attention. Sensitivity to workers' plight made Janah's aesthetics of industrial photography an unlikely channel through which his left radical politics persisted alongside his faith in Nehruvian developmental ethos. It gave him the space to express political sensitivity at a time when he was no longer formally associated with institutionalized leftist politics in India. Janah's willingness to challenge the viewers with a direct gaze, and his willingness to contrast Nehruvian industrial idealism with the dark and sweat of development was his distinct way of

Figure 18. Sunil Janah, Steel Smelting Shop at TISCO, 1950s

© Sunil Janah
Courtesy: Arjun Janah.

Figure 19. Sunil Janah, Two Miners, 1950s

© Sunil Janah
Courtesy: Arjun Janah.

Figure 20. *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, October 11, 1953
Courtesy: The British Library, London.

imagining the nation. Janah's photographic aesthetic often embraced and moved beyond its political message.

Afterlives of Janah's Photographs: From Newspapers to Art Galleries

Sunil Janah cherished the fact that his photographs have been museumized and have become collectors' items. "Not all has gone in vain," he said during his interview with me (S. Janah, personal interview, June 2011). "No human being is worth remembering for himself … if people remember my works, that will be good enough," he added (S. Janah, personal interview, June 2011). He wanted his photographs to be remembered by posterity. That was one of the reasons he co-authored three books on his photographs, contributed images to many others during his lifetime, and planned for a more comprehensive volume, which unfortunately only came out a year after his demise. Though he was honored to receive the Padmasree, the third highest civilian honor in India, Janah wrote, "I would have been far happier if the government had offered to publish a volume of [my] photographs" (Janah, 2013, p. 86).

He understood the ephemeral character of newspapers and journals, which may have immense impact momentarily but can never transcend the moment unless collected in a more durable book format. This is perhaps true for most of the iconic photographs—of events and of individuals—that the world has witnessed. "Showing over and over again" as Brink argued, is surely one of the ways in which "icons" are produced and kept alive in collective memory of beholders (Brink, 2000). For example, the two most famous institutions in the field of photojournalism, Time-Life and Magnum, had to publish collected editions of their landmark photographs and contact sheets for these images to survive in public memory (*Life, the First Decade*, 1979; *Life, the Second Decade, 1946–1955*, 1984; Galassi, Kismaric, & Safire, 1996; Lubben, 2011; Nair & Das, 1988). This applies to other newspapers too, ranging from collections of first pages of *The New York Times* to pages of *The Statesman* (Barron, Bernstein, & Abrahamson, 2009; *100 Years of the Statesman, 1875–1975*, 1975).

After being somewhat forgotten in popular Indian memory for years, Janah's photographs were revived as art objects by the 1998 exhibition at Gallery 678 in New York City. The curator of the show, Ram Rahman, brought Janah back to public life, while also attributing artistic potential to his photographs. The motivations for this revival pertain to Rahman's own genealogy.[40] Rahman is the son of famous Indian classical dancer Indrani Rahman, whom Janah had photographed extensively along with Shanta Rao, and others; Indrani had an overarching presence in Janah's second publication *Dances in the Golden Hall*. Rahman's father, the famous architect Habib Rahman, was Janah's friend and the Janahs considered Ram as part of their family. Additionally, Ram is one of founding members of SAHMAT (Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust), a leftist, secular, socially committed artists' collective in India (Moss & Rahman, 2013). "Sahmat on occasion acts like a de facto cultural front of the CPI(M); on other occasions it privileges its artists' constituency and defies the party line, thus developing remarkable strategies of commitment and autonomy" wrote India's leading art critic Geeta Kapur (Moss & Rahman, 2013, p. 269). According to art historian Karin Zitzewitz,

"Sahmat sees itself maintaining…the secular nationalist project of nation building" (Moss & Rahman, 2013, p. 278). However, from the practices of SAHMAT artists, it appears that their understanding of "nation building" did not incorporate the post-independence industrialization of the first two 5-year plans.

Ram Rahman has been instrumental in preserving Janah's legacy for a national and international public. Rahman's affective connection with Janah and his works and his own activist background prompted him to project Janah's photographs as socially committed leftist art without much consideration of Janah's industrial photography. As mentioned before Janah himself had an uneasy relationship with his photographs of newly emerging industries in post 1947 India. But his unease with industrial work-for-hire was completely different in character from the kind of political and aesthetic tension, generated in the wake of the 1998 New York exhibition, between leftist social justice imagination and industrial documentation.

The 1998 exhibition was a grand success in bringing Janah's photographs back to life. Janah's own perspectives on his photographic works together with Rahman's curatorial interest, and the dynamics of the art market shaped the structural logic of the exhibition. The two famous reviewers, Vicky Goldberg and Peter Nagy, confirmed Janah's revival as an artist. Goldberg reviewed the exhibition in *The New York Times*, while curator-gallery owner-critic Nagy reviewed it for *Time Out, New York* (Goldberg, 1998; Nagy, 1998).

Both the curator and reviewers placed emphasis on the ways in which Janah's photographs were narratives of history. Jyotirmoy Datta, arts editor of a prominent Indian diaspora weekly *India Abroad*, described the show as a "photographic Mahabharata"—an epic narration of stories with eternal significance (Datta, 1998). Goldberg characterized Janah as "dutiful guardian of history" and as "faithful servant of history," while Nagy was more restrained in making this straightforward connection between photographs and history (Goldberg, 1998, p. 36). In fact, Nagy explicitly conferred on Janah the status of an artist. "Sunil Janah is to India what Henri Cartier-Bresson was to France and what Margaret Bourke-White was to America: a daring visionary who straddles photojournalism and fine arts by always being in the right place at the right time," wrote Nagy (Nagy, 1998, p. 57).

Most notable, in this moment of revival, is the ways in which Janah's industrial photographs received scant critical attention, either in Rahman's curatorial note or in Goldberg's or in Nagy's reviews. However, Nagy was the only reviewer to explicitly mention that the show was "somewhat unwieldy" and that "[t]he second part of the show, covering the period between the 50s and 70s, is more sedate" than the first half, which was exclusively dedicated to the 1940s (Nagy, 1998, p. 57). Both the curator and critics spared only one or two sentences in passing to mention the fact that Janah *also* did some industrial photography, which they perceived as a minor aspect of his oeuvre. The industrial photographs for the curator and critics were simple visual expressions of the Nehruvian vision of development; it was as if Nehru's public speeches were more than sufficient to understand Janah's industrial photographs.

But this perception of Janah as a radical artist, who *only* chronicled the 1940s contradicted my experience in the Janahs' archive and my interviews with the couple. In the Janahs' archive I encountered more industrial photographs than I expected to see and the couple reflected on these industrial photographs with a deep investment. Both of

them were attached to the materiality of the photographs as well as the people they showed. Clearly Rahman's project was to place Janah's within the canon of socially conscious artistic practice in India. In the process, Janah's industrial photographs came to be perceived by the audience, critics and scholars alike, as not quite fit for his socially committed oeuvre. Rahman's curatorial intervention used the iconic status of Janah's photographs to establish the latter as a radical artist, while also cementing the iconic status of a specific set of photographs.

Removed from their contextual histories and confined to a gallery space some of the complex, reflexive qualities of Janah's work were obscured. He documented the famine at the time of its occurrence because as a photographer he felt responsible to portray the man-made catastrophe through channels of mass media. He did not bargain for the afterlife his images would have. Likewise, his industrial photographs resulted from a faith in the newly formed nation-state as well as anxieties about its industrializing drive. Further Janah's self-perception as an artist and as a visual chronicler was always fraught with a productive tension that made his aesthetic versatile and irreducible to any singular explanation.

Notes

1. *People's War* was the weekly organ of the undivided Communist Party of India (CPI) from 1942 through 1945; the States Peoples Press published it from Bombay (now Mumbai). From 1945 the organ was renamed as *People's Age* and continued till 1949, when the name was changed again. Names were changed many times to avoid the government-imposed ban on CPI publications. For details of these name changes for the period under discussion, see Overstreet and Windmiller (1960, p. 448).

2. *The Illustrated Weekly of India* was one of the most important English language weeklies in India over a century from 1880 through 1993. It began publication in 1880 and was renamed *The Illustrated Weekly of India* in 1923. See http://www.kamat.com/database/sources/weekly.htm accessed on June 19, 2014; http://www.timescontent.com/tss/showcase/Microfilm/Illustrated-Weekly/975/IllustratedWeekly.html accessed on June 19, 2014.

3. The titles of review articles on these exhibitions point to ways in which Janah's photographs were perceived primarily as visual chronicle of the history of India and I will discuss this issue at the end of this article.

4. By the 1970s, other internationally famous photojournalists including Raghubir Singh (1942–1999), Raghu Rai (1942-), and Pablo Bartholomew (1955-) had replaced Janah as a celebrity photojournalist/documentary photographer.

5. *India: A Celebration of Independence, 1947–1997* was a multicity exhibition, which traveled widely in the USA and in India. For newspaper reviews of this exhibition see Cotter (1997) and Shedee (1997). These two are the most comprehensive reviews and provide various perspectives on the ways in which the exhibition was received in the USA and in India, respectively.

6. Dipesh Chakrabarty argued, "the transition from a colonial order to a postcolonial …was a long one, beginning sometime well before 1947—in the 1920s say—and continuing well into the 1960s." See Chakrabarty, Majumdar, and Sartori (2007, p. 3). Following Chakrabarty, I consider the 1940s and the 1950s as segments of a protracted and unending "historical process" of "becoming postcolonial."

7. For details of the art historical debates on artistic modernism in India, see Mitter (2007), Brown (2009), Zitzewitz (2014), and Bittner and Rohmberg (2013).

8. For this position, see specially Brown (2009).

9. For details of "aura" (of an art work) and "secularized ritual" (in the gallery), see Walter Benjamin et al. (2008, p. 24). Janah's photographs nevertheless had a different kind of "aura,"

which following Miriam Hansen would be "a phenomenal structure that enables the manifestation of gaze." See Hansen (2012, p. 108).

10. I draw on Walter Benjamin's differentiation between titles and captions. Benjamin argued that captions for photographs in illustrated magazines came as "directives," while to him titles suggested "free-floating contemplation." See the second version of Benjamin's artwork essay in Walter Benjamin et al. (2008, p. 27).

11. Following Walter Benjamin, I am using an expanded conception of aesthetic autonomy, which is not confined *only* within the domain of "high art." Going back to the Greek root of aesthetics (i.e., *aisthetikos* that is translated as sense of perception), Benjamin characterized aesthetics as theory of perception. See Walter Benjamin et al. (2008, p. 41).

12. However, Tapati Guha-Thakurta (2015) suggested "own criteria of evaluation" not for documentary photography but for Durga-puja-*pandal* installations in Kolkata.

13. All original copies of *Hungry Bengal* were seized and destroyed by the British Indian Government, who saw this publication as a threat to the war efforts, which according to scholars was one of the main reasons for the famine. The only copy, which survived in a bank vault of the artist's niece Gargi Chatterjee, has been republished as a facsimile edition by the Delhi Art Gallery (DAG) in 2011. For a newspaper report on Chittaprosad's works and the discovery of *Hungry Bengal* (1943), see Susan (2011), online edition http://www.tehelka.com/a-revolutionary-artist-how-the-british-burnt-his-shocking-images-from-the-1943-bengal-famine-and-how-we-can-finally-see-them-today/ accessed on January 13, 2015.

14. Scholars working on the famine of 1943 have mostly credited *The Statesman* for breaking the silence around September 1943 when other newspapers, both British and Indian operated, did not publish anything on the magnitude of the food crisis. However, the CPI organ *People's War* chronicled the persistent food crisis across India since late 1942; they were the first newspaper to publish a photograph of an impoverished woman in a relief camp in Orissa and Janah's photographs were the first to depict the famine situation in Chittagong, Midnapur, and Orissa. In fact *People's War* ran a special Bengal number. CPI's organizational structure helped them to get detailed reports from almost every part of the country while the mainstream newspapers had to send their special correspondents to get reports from distant locations. For example, see *People's War* (December 20, 1942, pp. 2, 4; December 27, 1942, pp. 4–5).

15. For details of one such exhibition in Bombay, see *People's War*. The spread also contained a sketch by Chittaprosad of the incoming mass of visitors to the exhibition. Eventually *Hungry Bengal* became the name of Chittaprosad's collection of sketches.

16. For a glimpse of the ways in which Janah's photographs of the Famine of 1943 were invoked in the late 1970s to discuss the role of mass circulated visuals of disasters vis-à-vis censorship of the press, see Malik, Amita (December 4, 1977). "The Cyclone and After," *The Times of India*, p. 8. Amita Malik was a noted columnist and worked with *The Statesman* as well (see Malik, 1999).

17. The "Illustrated Weekly Preview" advertised the photographs as "striking studies by well-known photographer Sunil Janah." See Classified "Ad 1 -- No Title", *The Times of India* (July 22, 1954, p. 7).

18. The spread of "Special Bengal Number" (November 7, 1943) in *People's War* testify to the ways in which P.C. Joshi's reportage on the famine was illustrated by Janah's photographs that were put together under the title "The March of Death"; also see January 23, 1944 edition for the ways in which verbal texts and photographs interacted in *People's War*.

19. India Office collection is replete with photographs and sketches of the Famine of 1876–1878 and sketches of other famines that preceded the invention of photography. Predating halftone printing, the photographs from 1876–1878 were not published in newspapers and did not circulate in the public sphere the way Janah's photographs circulated. Moreover, the photographs from 1876–1878 were formally different than those made by Janah. The former were colonial anthropological documentation where the emaciated human figures were displayed

against a backdrop of colonial architecture. They lacked the compassion and empathy with which Janah portrayed his photographic subjects while documenting famine in India during the 1940s. The formal difference can be attributed to the different purposes the two sets of photographs were meant to serve. The colonial official photographs were simply recording, while Janah's photographs were part of his activism. More importantly famine photographs from a pre-halftone era were not as widely available as was possible after newspapers began printing photographs from the early twentieth century. Thus the experience of seeing Janah's photographs must have been novel for the newspaper reading public in 1940s India. For an insightful discussion of pre-halftone photographs of famines, see Chaudhary (2012, pp. 153–188).

20. Sunil Janah's collaboration with his wife Sobha Janah has been thoroughly overlooked. They worked closely throughout the second part of his career. Ms Janah—who was a doctor by profession—was overshadowed by her famous husband. Public discussions of Mr Janah's works have been oblivious to Ms Janah's importance in Mr Janah's career: only one newspaper report mentioned them as a team. Yet throughout the decades of their marriage, Ms Janah was intimately involved in the production of Janah's photographs. She not only accompanied Janah on some of his photographic assignments, but also helped him in the darkroom, developing and printing his photographs. For a report on their joint exhibition in Bombay (now Mumbai), see Our Art Critic (July 20, 1956) "The Camera as Sculptor," *The Times of India*.

21. I raise this point because there is often an anxiety among photographers, including Sunil Janah, and viewers alike about aestheticization *vis-à-vis* "pure documentation," which does not allow attention to formal arrangement.

22. Apart from other photographs with human subjects, Rai made a series of portraits in which subjects' gazes were the primary focus. For Rai's portfolio titled *Bangladesh, The Price of Freedom*, available on Magnum website, see http://www.magnumphotos.com/C.aspx?VP3=CMS3&VF=MAGO31_10_VForm&ERID=24KL535PGF (accessed on January 29, 2015).

23. Janah wrote on how after moving to London in 1980 he had concentrated on making enlargements of his previously published photographs and of negatives that were never printed. He lamented that his failing eyesight due to myopia allowed him *only* darkroom activities and not photographing people out in the world (see Janah, 2013, pp. 92–93).

24. The photograph of the mother and child in Figure 7 also appears to be different in different publication formats (Figure 1). A comparison between the version in the *People's War* and that in Janah's published volume *Photographing India* suggests that one of these versions was a reverse print. Janah's personal archive holds a large silver bromide exhibition print with the woman's head on the right, which suggests that this orientation was preferred and that the version in *Photographing India* was printed in reverse. The book was printed after the demise of Mr. and Ms. Janah, and the low print quality of the photographs suggests a lack of expert supervision during the book production, which may have resulted in the reverse print.

25. Goldberg quoted both cable messages, while discussing Bourke-White's experiences after the Direct Action Day that resulted in the Calcutta Riot, and the details of the publication history of the particular photograph (see Goldberg, 1986, p. 307).

   I am indebted to Dipesh Chakrabarty for drawing my attention to the fact that when we look at Janah's photographs we see a humanist perspective on the degeneration of a human moral order. The moments like the famine or the communal violence challenge the ideal conditions of being human. These moments blurred the boundaries between relative positions of humans and animals within an "ideal" human order. Following Chakrabarty's argument, I see Janah's photographs as symptomatic of how humanism was one of the ways in which human-centric understanding of the world operates. Thus Janah's photographs would probably have appealed to us differently had we not assumed human beings as the dominant species and only as a constituent element of the larger species family. For a detailed discussion of human-centric understanding of the world vis-à-vis "anthropocentric thinking for forms of disposition towards the planet that do not put humans first" (see Chakrabarty, 2014).

Dislocating the human and the human perception from the center also questions a very basic human assumption that animals and humans indeed have a similar perspective of the visible world. For a discussion on animal and human perspectives centered on the question of illusionism, see Mitchell (1994).

Detailed discussion on homocentric understanding of scopic regime/s vis-à-vis non-homocentric idea/s of vision and perception is beyond the scope of this essay.

26. Janah quoted this comment during one of our discussion sessions. See Sunil Janah, interview with the author, June 2011.

27. However, Janah did not specify what could be considered as "too many" if perfection may be the result.

28. The phrase "staged candid" is often used by critics and scholars to designate a visual style in journalistic and documentary photographs that appears to be candid but are made through active staging of scenes in front of the camera lens. Photojournalists and documentary photographers often stage in order to get specific desired effects in photographs so they can convey their meaning more powerfully than would have been possible otherwise.

29. Indeed the CPI "decided to exercise a strict programmatic control and censure of cultural engagements" (see Dasgupta, 2005, p. 82).

30. For a brief history and details of the Damodar Valley Corporation projects, see among others Prasad (1963), Chaudhuri (2000), and Klingensmith (2007).

31. Classified Ad 1—No Title, *The Times of India* (October 8, 1953, p. 7); for some of Janah's photo-essays on different subjects refer to "Calcutta's Howrah Station" (*The Times of India*, August 27, 1956, p. 6); "Little Ships on the Hooghly," *The Times of India* (October 15, 1956, p. 6). These classified ads, which were published regularly for the *Illustrated Weekly* point to the fact that the magazine was widely publicized; readers who would only read *Times of India* would still be knowledgeable about the topics and photographs published in *Illustrated Weekly* (see *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, January 1, 1961).

32. For two of the most elaborate obituaries reflecting on Janah's illustrious life and famous photographs from the 1940s, see Ram Rahman, "Portraitist of the Nehruvian Era," *The Hindu* (June 23, 2012) (online edition, http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/portraitist-of-the-nehruvian-era/article3559899.ece, accessed on June 19, 2014); Haresh Pandya, "Sunil Janah, Who Chronicled India in Photographs, Dies at 94," *The New York Times* (July 9, 2012) (online edition, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/10/world/asia/sunil-janah-who-photographed-bengal-famine-dies-at-94.html, accessed on June 19, 2014).

33. There were other moments including his loss of vision in the early 1980s and demise of his daughter in 2004. See, Sunil Janah, interview with the author (June 2011) and Janah, *Photographing India*. Janah's relationship with his photographs during his blindness recalls W.J.T Mitchell's invocation of Jose Saramago's novel *Blindness* (New York: Harcourt, 1997). Mitchell wrote, blindness "deserve special attention in any theory of visual culture" (Mitchell, 2005, p. 349). Discussion on Janah's blindness vis-à-vis South Asian visual culture is beyond the scope of this article.

34. Sunil Janah reemphasized heroism during his interview.

35. Janah was loosely quoting Susan Sontag (see Sontag, 1977, p. 11).

36. Besides still photography, motion picture photography too was instrumental in documenting the processes of industrialization in India. Jawaharlal Nehru had invited Roberto Rossellini to make documentary motion pictures on India's industrial ventures and the ways in which "new India" was emerging through industrialization. For details of Rossellini's visit to India, see Padgaonkar (2008).

37. Ali himself also believed, as he mentioned during one of his interviews, that large scale industrialization would bring prosperity to the newly formed Republic of India (A. Ali, personal interview, August 2013).

38. Subcontracted labors were / are not given safety equipment in most Indian industries.
39. Janah's photograph of miners is often reminiscent of photographs of coal miners made by Louis Hine, Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and Margaret Bourke-White. Indeed Janah's comments on the relationship between man and machine often echoes Lewis Hine's remark that "[t]he more you see of modern machines, the more may you, too, respect the men who make and manipulate them." These affinities are not unlikely given that Janah participated in a globally available discourse of documentary photography and was inspired by the Firm Security Administration (FSA) photographs' appreciation for human lives amidst deprivation. For Hine's works, see among others Hine (1932) and Sampsell-Willmann (2009). For a study of photographs made under Firm Security Administration see Finnegan (2003).
40. Another important factor was the conditions of the art market in India after the economic liberalization in 1991. It is not coincidental that his photographs were museumized, became collectors' items, and entered the art market after a general upsurge of interest in India after liberalization and after the 50th anniversary of independence.

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