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The Art of Witnessing: Sunil Janah and India's Industrial Modernization

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Sunil Janah/Making a Photograph is on view from February 3 to March 26, 2022, at Experimenter, Ballygunge Place, Kolkata

Showcasing 26 images from the Indian industrial landscape of the 1950s and '60s captured by the lens of ace photographer Sunil Janah (1918-2012), this exhibition reflects on the possibilities and the perils offered by post-independent India's Nehruvian modernization project. The exhibits demonstrate how Janah's practice was rooted in global and cosmopolitan conversations on documentary realism, modernist abstraction, and social commitment for photographing machine-scapes, while also remaining grounded in the historical specificities of postcolonial India. Simultaneously, the show provides a rare opportunity to appreciate photographic prints as material objects embodying histories of production, reproduction, archiving and decay.

Janah was born in Dibrugarh (Assam) in an upper-middle class professional Bengali family and grew up in Calcutta. Mentored by close family friend and leading photographer Shambhu Saha (1905-1988), Janah took to photography while still in school, winning contests organized by *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and getting his works published. Subsequently, he pursued a Master's degree in English literature, hoping to become a professional writer, but became closely associated with the Communist Party of Indian (CPI) which propelled his career as a photographer. During this phase, Janah always prioritized his role as a political worker/activist; his photographer identity was somewhat secondary. Indeed, P.C. Joshi, the legendary Secretary of the undivided CPI, convinced Janah to give up on his literature course and travel with him and fellow comrade-artist Chittaprasad to document the humanitarian crisis of the 1943 Bengal Famine. Janah's photographs were the first ever to throw light on the famine, prompting Indian and international criticism of the colonial government. Thereafter, Janah photographed human experience in the subcontinent ravaged by hunger, communal violence and the partition. The change in CPI leadership after independence resulted in his expulsion from the party in 1949, which proved to be a watershed in his oeuvre. Janah, who had in between moved to Bombay to work with the CPI commune there, now shifted back to Calcutta and started taking up industrial commissions from public and private sectors.

His first commission came from the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC), to be followed by assignments for various industrial companies dealing in heavy metal, metal ores and coal. These included the 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. Along with machines and mechanical processes, Janah photographed the everyday lives of the industrial workforce, who he felt showed immense courage in their fight against deprivation and injustices. Later on, he turned to vastly different subjects such as India's temple architecture, tribal communities, dance forms, and portraits of well-known individuals. Over the years, he collaborated with artists, writers and scholars, including photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White and anthropologist Verrier Elwin, and published several books. Eventually, he moved with his family to Delhi in the 1980s, and from there to London, before finally settling down in Berkeley, where he passed away in 2012, leaving behind an enormous treasure trove of negatives, prints, books and personal papers, that are still waiting to be explored.

Janah's works circulated widely within and beyond India through the 1980s, when he lost his eyesight. They made their way into community and political party exhibitions, newspapers and magazines, including *The Statesman* and *Illustrated Weekly*, and sites of India's cultural diplomacy, including the Festival of India in the UK. His prints were variously collected by public and private institutions and individuals. Several exhibition prints were also lost in transit, which was the source of much dismay. The prints on view at Experimenter come from the Swaraj Art Archive, Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, photographer-activist Ram Rahman's collection, and unspecified private collection/s. They depict work at the Bhilai steel plant (Indo-Soviet collaboration), the Rourkela steel plant (India's first public sector steel plant created through Indo-German collaboration), the DVC Dams (modelled after the Tennessee Valley Corporation, USA), Bird & Co. coal mines, Burn & Co. steel plant, Calcutta Port (Kidderpore Docks), and jute drying and transportation near Calcutta. Together they represent heavy industrial complexes, the human subjects who were vital components in Janah's machine aesthetics, and abstracted geometric forms that characterize industrial photography of the period across cultures.

In his speeches and writings, India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, repeatedly emphasized how heavy industries were not an end in themselves but stood for something bigger, incorporating Indian citizens within what he phrased as "[the] nation's will to march forward with strength, determination and courage." Thus, what the heavy industries represented needed to be visualized, documented, and their ideas propagated for a wider public participation in the post-independence project of industrial modernization and nation-building. Industrial photography, thereby, emerged as the prime site for visualizing the nation. At one level, Janah's photographs depict his admiration for the industrial sublime and the impersonal technocratic vision of planning and development in Nehruvian India. Yet, like Nehru's own relationship with machines, these photographs are not an uncomplicated celebration of the "machine age"; they highlight the centrality of human lives in the making of a machine regime. Writing years later on his industrial works, Janah indicated that he was "documenting history." Indeed, *Making a Photograph* bears witness to a history that preserves traces of human dignity in India's collective memory. This memory, according to Janah, would otherwise only remember the glories of industrial development without acknowledging the countless nameless people who contributed to it.

The title *Making a Photograph* is inspired by American photographer Ansel Adams' book of the same name, one of the first books on photography Janah read. Although Janah never specialized in landscape photography like Adams, the latter's emphasis on shades of grey while maintaining contrast, his camera techniques and dedication to darkroom processes informed Janah's approach to the photographic medium. In the introduction to his book *Photographing India*, published posthumously in 2013, Janah emphasized this: "[T]echnical excellence remained vitally important to me." Consequently, anyone with first-hand familiarity with Janah's impeccable silver gelatin prints from the 1950s and '60s would readily identify that most of the prints on show come from a later date. Their surface bear traces of negative scratches and other print-making processes that remained uncorrected, despite Janah's perfectionism which he held on to as long as he could practice it. Likewise, compared to his signatures on the early generation of prints, Janah's signatures on the images on view demonstrate a long hand, resulting perhaps from failing eyesight. Besides, the prints embody damaged emulsion, tear and crease, indicating diverse handling, archiving, and their layered lives as travelled objects. At a time when silver gelatin prints are a rarity and analog-chemical photography has acquired the moniker of "retro," *Making a Photograph* provides a space of nostalgia for a bygone era, both technologically and thematically.

These photographs also draw sharp attention to how convention and norms of industrial photography changed since the days of Janah. For example, smoke and fume emitted by industrial production provide the dramatic backdrop to many of the photographs on display, and were celebrated as markers of development and progress. However, by the mid-1970s, they came to be perceived as unwanted industrial pollution, prompting industries to instruct their commissioned photographers to edit out traces of emission.

The show is the first of its kind in Kolkata in decades and is instrumental in bringing Janah's work back to a wider public, beyond the niche circuits of scholars, archivists, collectors and curators. More importantly, this exclusive focus on Janah's industrial photographs destabilizes the popular notion that these industrial assignments were a "minor" aspect in Janah's creative pursuit that found greater expression in social documentation, portraiture, architecture, performance and tribal photography. However, more contextual information on the photographs within the gallery space would have helped viewers to better appreciate their contexts and Janah's illustrious career. An informed audience would miss seeing long-form titles for some of the photographs marked as "Untitled", given Janah's preference for linguistic details. Further an accompanying catalogue would ensure the continued life of the discussions initiated by the show. Nonetheless, *Making a Photograph* is a significant effort in making accessible the lesser-known works in Janah's oeuvre.