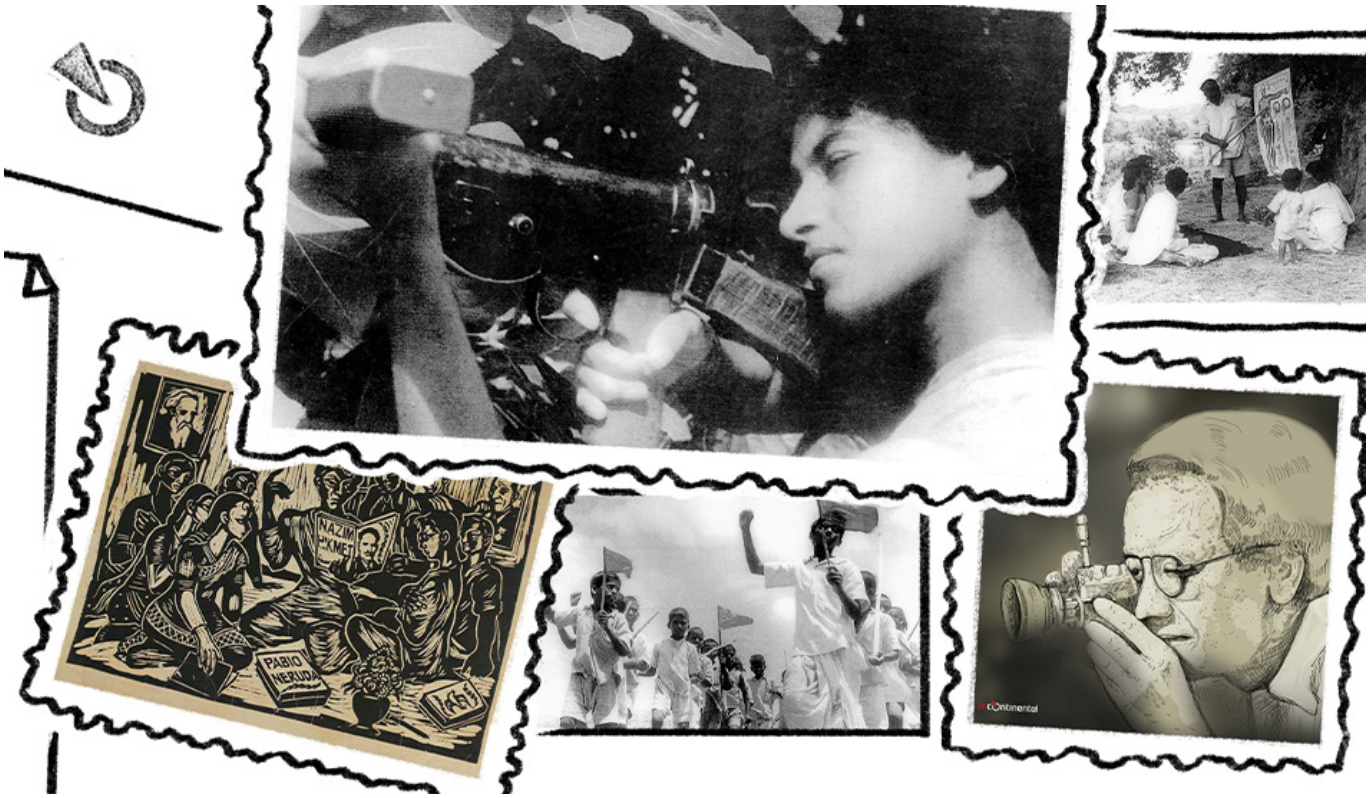
Photographing Wretchedness and the People's Manifest Revolts Against It

The Seventh Tricontinental Art Bulletin (September 2024)

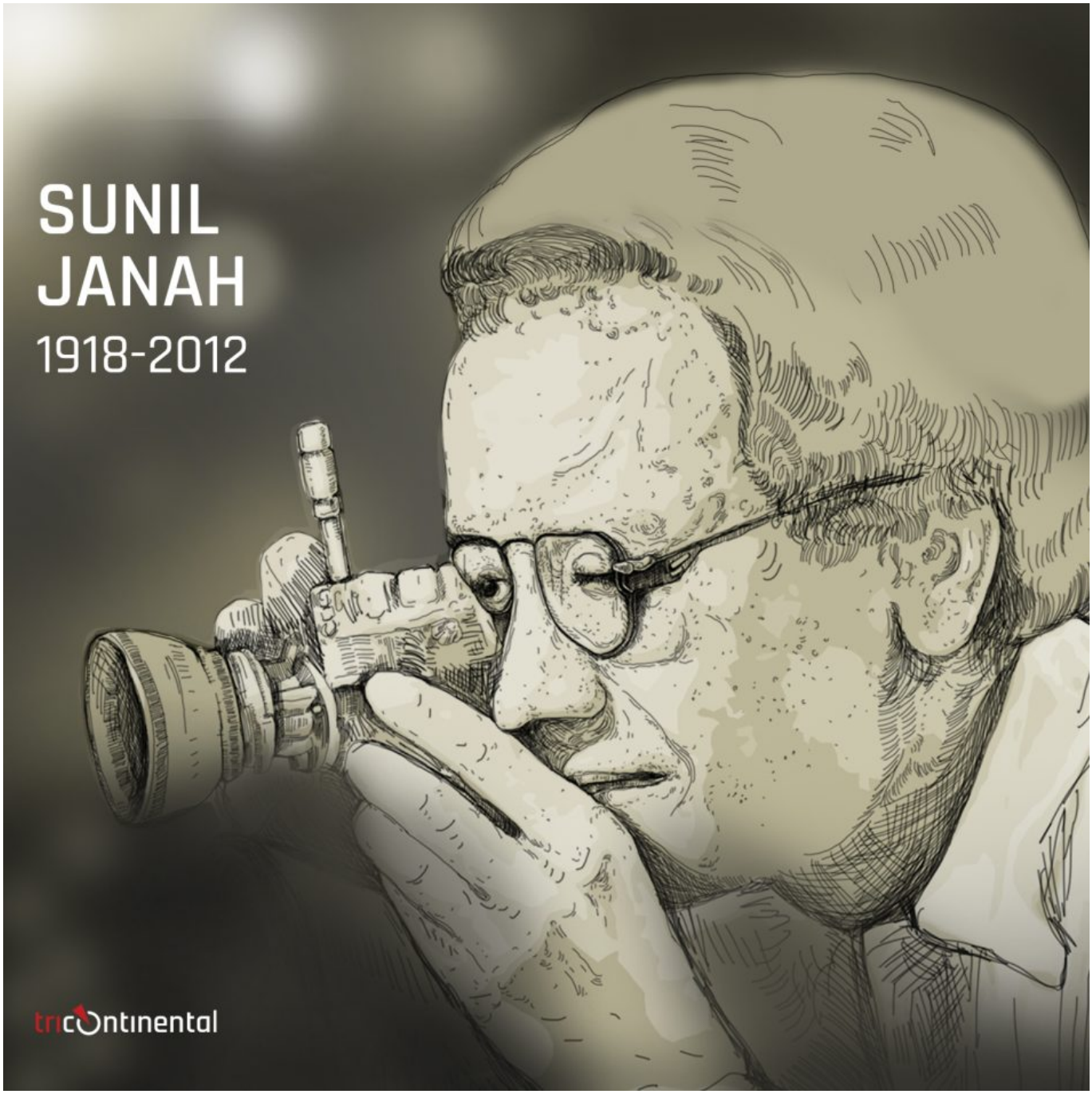


Listen to 'Makoddi Tella Dora Tanamu (We Don't Want this White Lord's Rule)' - Garimella Satyanarayana's

Have a listen to Garimella Satyanarayana's (1893–1952) immensely popular song from the Andhra-Telangana region, 'Makoddi Tella Dora Tanamu (We Don't Want this White Lord's Rule)', which was banned by the British government.

Sunil Janah (1918–2010) was born into a Bengali family in Assam, British India on 17 April 1918. He grew up in Kolkata (then Calcutta) in undivided Bengal and at university in the 1930s, was quickly drawn into

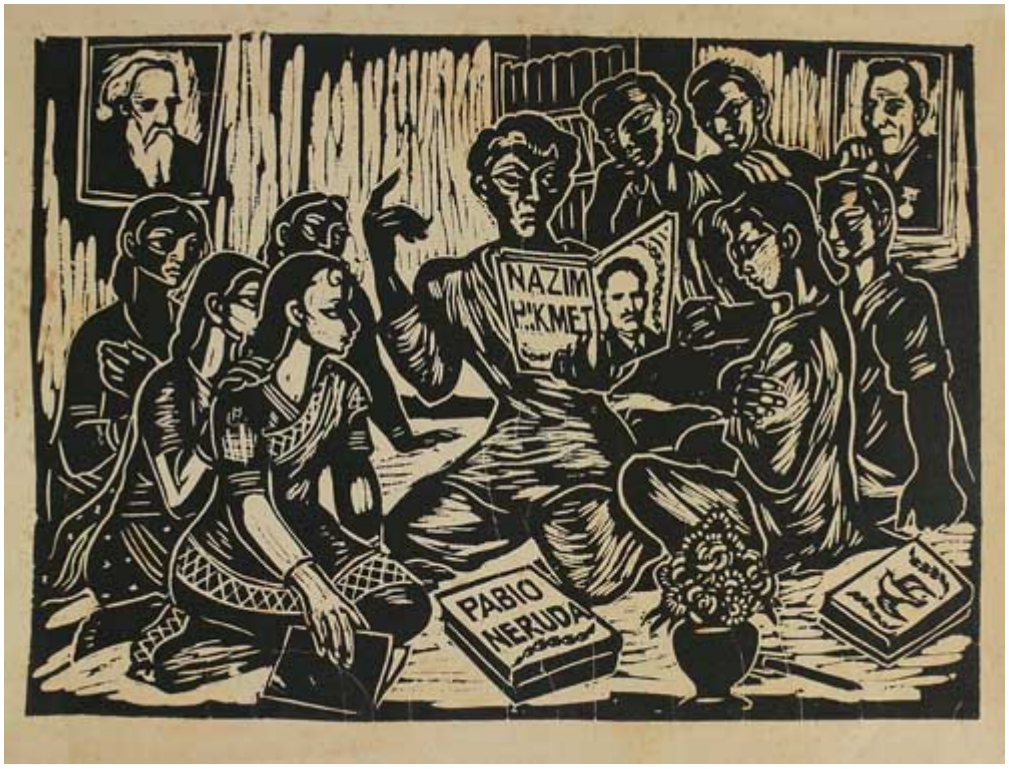
student politics and the anti-colonial freedom struggle. Around this time, his grandmother had bought him a camera, a Voigtlander Brilliant f7.7, while his photographer uncle lent him his darkroom to test his new craft. This was a period of cultural flourishing in the country, sparked by the anti-colonial struggle and the international movement against fascism, spearheaded by the Communist International (Comintern).



The Seventh Congress of the Comintern called for the formation of an Anti-Imperialist United Front in colonies and dependent countries, and cultural organisations began to be formed to support those efforts. In India, the influential Progressive Writers Association (PWA) was created in 1936, led by Mulk Raj Anand, Premchand, and Rabindranath Tagore among other prominent figures, and by 1943, the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) was formed. As the Japanese began to bomb parts of eastern India in 1942, the Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Association was established in Bengal, with Bengali communists taking the

lead in reviving the Marxist cultural movement, whose history is documented in the two-volume Marxist Cultural Movement: Chronicles and Documents (1936–1947), edited by Sudhi Pradhan

As expressed in PWA's manifesto, these organisations understood that writers and artists had a duty 'to give expression to the changes taking place in Indian life and to assist the spirit of progress in the country by scientific rationalism'. They defined 'progressive' as 'all that arouses in us a critical spirit, which examines institutions and customs in the light of reason, which helps to act, to organise ourselves, to transform'. It was around this period of cultural awakening – when Janah was still a university student – that P.C. Joshi, then General Secretary of the Communist Party of India (CPI) who took a personal interest in the organisation of cultural work, recruited Janah, along with visual artist Chittaprosad to join the ranks of cultural workers.

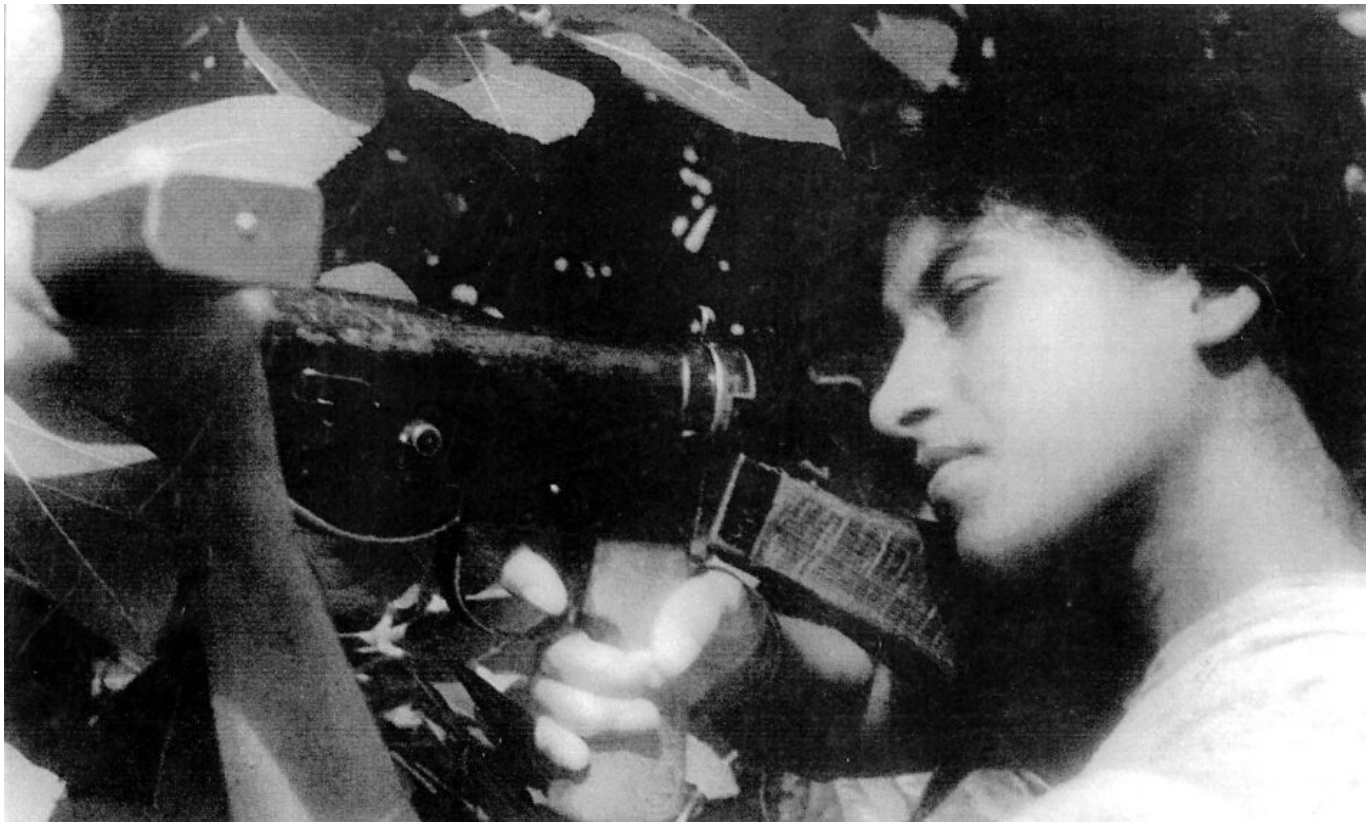


Chittaprosad (India), c.1950.

In 1943, both Janah and Chittaprosad were sent to document the Bengal Famine, which claimed the lives of three million people at the tail-end of Britain's brutal colonial rule. Ram Rahman, an Indian photographer who has spent the last three decades preserving the memory of Janah's life and work, spoke to me about this intense period of his career with the party. For Rahman, what made Janah unique was the fact that he was 'not a photojournalist in the traditional sense, who may go in to photograph a social situation, a political issue, or a protest' but is not actually a part of the struggle. Janah was 'an insider, and his photographic work *was* his political work'.

At the time, CPI had a wide circulation of newspapers published in multiple languages, and it was in the English-language *People's War* where Janah's photographs first found their audiences, printed in innovative ways that could appeal to largely illiterate peasant masses. According to Rahman, 'sometimes you would have an entire page which had only photographs on it with a small amount of text'. This was the first time in India

where photographs were not printed as small images for informational purposes, but they were meant to create an impact for all, regardless of literacy levels. 'So, the use of photography by the Communist Party publications was actually quite revolutionary,' he added.

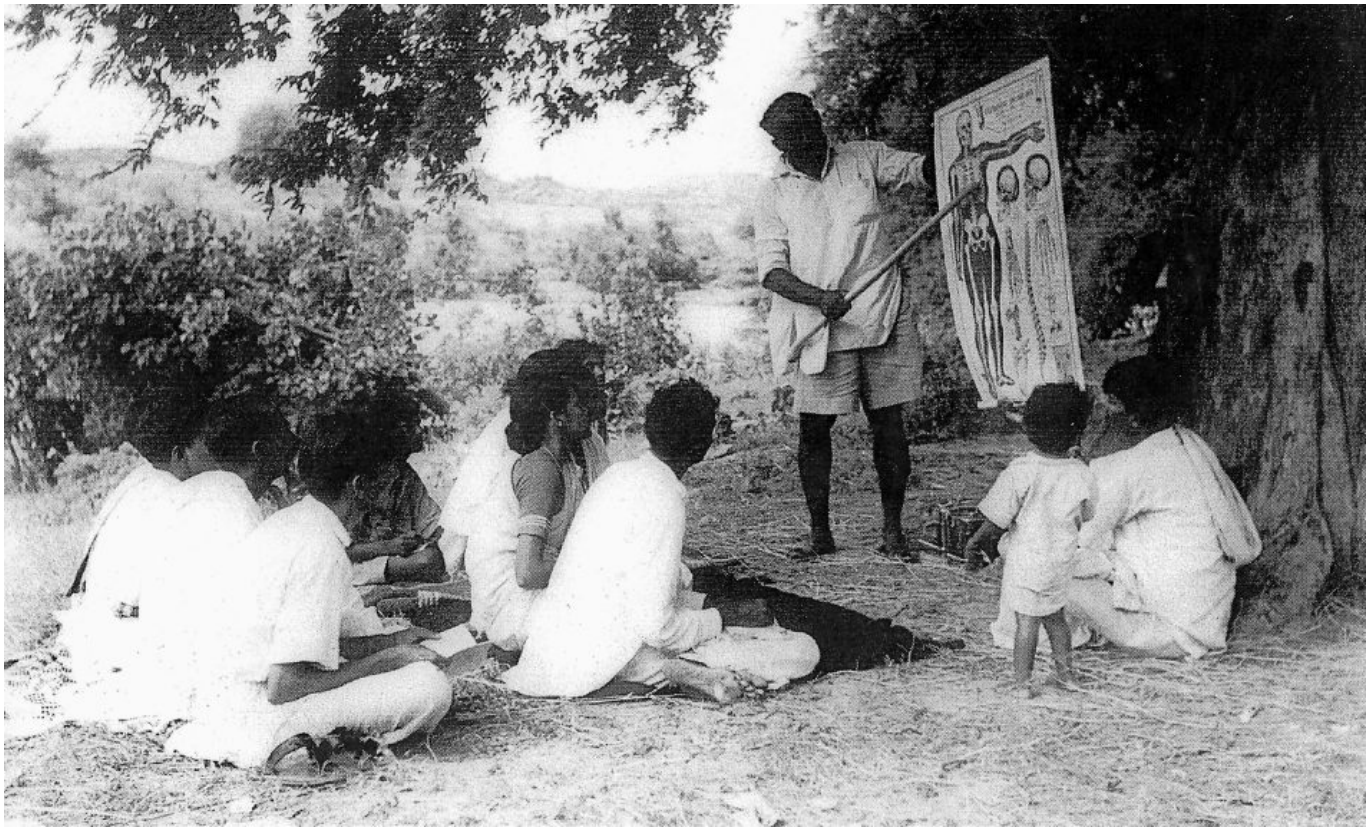


Credit: Sunil Janah, late 1940s.

These images were a powerful mobilising tool, bearing witness to the existence of a brutal famine that the British were actively trying to deny was happening. As Mao Zedong said in his ***Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature***, one of the tasks of cultural workers is to 'expose the dark' and the cruelties of the enemy of the people, while at the same time 'praising the bright', the noble struggle of the people, and their inevitable victory. Images, such as song and theatre, can speak directly to the hearts and the minds of people who may not know how to read. It can arouse that spirit of struggle to act, organise, and transform society towards socialism.

Sunil Janah (India), late 1940s.

In Janah's opening note for ***Second Creature***, a collection of his photographs from the 1940s, during 'four years of almost continuous wandering throughout India', he writes about the subject of his work: 'While broadly speaking, my subject was the Indian people, my emphasis had been on the distressing conditions of their lives, their poverty and wretchedness, and their repeatedly manifest revolt against it'. But even in his assignments to document famines, epidemics, and slum conditions, he would 'collect so many pictures of smiling, handsome women'. For him, their smiles represented 'the youth, charm, and vitality which are not yet quite destroyed in such a people, and which appear as irrepressibly as the hunger I had gone to portray'. His wanderings in this period were not motivated by an individual agenda, they were a part of a political cause. As Janah explained, 'I was a committed worker of my Party and my political ideology. I was a dedicated Communist'.



Sunil Janah (India), late 1940s.

Today, it is not difficult to encounter Janah's images of the Bengal Famine online, as well as his photographs of the Adivasis, national leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, and industrial projects – the 'temples of New India' – after independence. Perhaps lesser seen are his photographs of the Telegana armed struggle (1946–1951), which have been included in this art bulletin as well as in our latest **dossier**, *The Telugu's Peoples Struggle for Land and Dreams*. This publication dives into the tradition of struggle songs and the contributions of people's singers and artists that crafted songs and plays to inspire 'millions of the poor and oppressed to imagine a world in which they would no longer be enchained, while building their confidence to fight for it'.

How to build the people's confidence, and through which content and artistic and cultural forms, remains a relevant and urgent question. If Janah's Bengal series was about 'exposing the dark' of colonial brutality, then his Telegana photographs 'praised the bright' of the communist struggle: confident peasant women training to use arms, children marching with red flags, doctors providing healthcare, educators teaching under a tree, and men and women marching in camouflage ready to seize their future with their own hands. This dossier, along with archival images and songs mentioned in its pages, are a powerful affirmation of the transformative power of culture and the necessity of cultural workers to awaken, nourish, and sustain the struggle for socialism.

Sunil Janah (India), late 1940s.

Despite his broad and extensive repertoire, by the 1970s, Janah's work had faded from public view. Ram Rahman, then a student at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, had a burgeoning interest in photography. He knew about Janah's work only because he had seen his prints growing up in his home – his grandmother, who was a classical dancer, had sought out Janah to photograph her in the late 1940s when he had begun his own commercial studio. 'In the seventies, I began to realise that his body of work was actually hugely important,' Rahman recalled, 'and it was no longer publicly accessible because those newspapers had vanished and rotted'. He described it as 'serendipitous' when Rahman and Janah discovered they were both living in the US. Janah had brought along his original prints, when he had moved there in the '80s and agreed to Rahman's proposal of organising an exhibition together. They assembled a show with very little money: foam core boards, double-sided tape, no frames nor glass, mounted at a friend's New York City loft. The exhibition got rave reviews, but more importantly was Janah's own reaction. 'My God, I've never seen all my work together like this,' he told Rahman, 'This is my work, and this is my life'.

Sunil Janah (India), late 1940s.

The same year as the retrospective exhibition, Janah gave an interview, looking back at over five decades of his photographic work: 'Even today my belief and conviction is in socialism. Capitalism is an uncivilised and inhuman system whose foundation is greed'. Rahman affirmed Janah's lifelong political conviction even in the decades after his direct work in the communist movement: 'His kind of empathy with the working class, also his connections with the creative community in India, which came out of the Communist Party continued right through his life'.

In other news…


Art and Cultural Canvas conference, Andhra University, India.

Last month, I had the pleasure of delivering a speech at the inaugural conference of the Art and Cultural Canvas student club at the Andhra University in India. Earlier this year, they organised an art exhibition in solidarity with Palestine in collaboration with the **Young Socialist Artists** collective before formalising their organisation.

In the spirit of international solidarity, I highly recommend you watch this **interview** on 'Cultural Resistance to Imperialism' with South African musician, Zolani Mkiva, whose music draws inspiration from the Cuban and Bolivarian Revolutions. Also, here is a **video** of the thirty-metre mural in São Paulo painted in solidarity with the Palestinian people as part of the National Day of Muralism, organised by the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) in Brazil.

César Mosquera (Venezuela/Utopix), 2024.

Finally, the Red Books Day poster of the month is by César Mosquera, Venezuelan illustrator and web developer from the **Utopix** community. His artwork pays homage to Ludovico Silva's (1937–1998) *Antimanual para el uso de marxistas, marxólogos y marxianos* ('*Anti-Manual for Marxists, Marxologists, and Marxians*'). In his introduction written in Caracas in 1974, Silva defends a non-dogmatic reading of Marxism, affirming that in the Latin American context, there are those who, 'with a *sur le vif* ['taken from life'] knowledge of Marx, take the classic categories and make them resonate with the rhythm of the earthquakes of the Andean mountains'.

Across the Third World, from Telegana to the Andean mountains, generations of communists did just that, applying and adapting Marxism to local histories and realities. 'In this way', Silva wrote, 'we can surpass Marx by realising him…inventing concepts and categories that he would have invented if he lived in our century'.

Warmly,

Tings Chak
Art director, Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research