

Classic Poetry Series

**Purushottama Lal**  
**- poems -**

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# Purushottama Lal(28 August 1929 – 3 November 2010)

Purushottama Lal was an Indian poet, essayist, translator, professor and publisher. He was the founder and publisher of Writers Workshop in Calcutta, established in 1958.

## <b> Life and education

Born in Kapurthala in the state of Punjab, he studied English at the St Xavier's College, and later at the University of Calcutta. He would later teach at St. Xavier's College for over forty years.

P. Lal was an honorary Professor of English at St. Xavier's College, Calcutta. He was Special Professor of Indian Studies at Hofstra University from 1962 to 1963, and has since held Visiting Professorships at many colleges and universities throughout America. These included (apart from Hofstra University), University of Illinois, Albion College, Ohio University, Hartwick College, Berea College, and Western Maryland College.

He married Shyamasree Devi in 1955, and has a son, Ananda Lal, and a daughter, Srimati Lal (Artist, Poet & Writer: ). P. Lal's wife Shyamasree is the daughter of late Kalidas Nag, an eminent historian and Indologist, and Shanta Devi, a novelist.

## <b> Career</b>

Under the name of P. Lal, he wrote eight books of poetry, over a dozen volumes of literary criticism, a memoir, several books of stories for children, as well as dozens of translations from other languages, chiefly Sanskrit, into English. He also edited a number of literary anthologies.

He is perhaps best known as the translator into English of the entire Indian epic poem Mahabharata. His translation, which was published in an edition of over three hundred fascicules since the early 1970s, was republished in a collated edition of eighteen large volumes. His Mahabharata is the most complete in any language, comprising all the slokas included in all recensions of the work. His translation of the Mahabharata is characteristically both poetic and swift to read, and oriented to the oral/musical tradition in which the work was originally created. To emphasize this tradition, in 1999 he began reading the entire

100,000-sloka work aloud, for one hour each Sunday at a Calcutta library hall. In addition to the Mahabharata, his translations from Sanskrit included a number of other religious works, including 21 of the Upanisads, as well as plays and lyric poetry. He also translated modern writers such as Premchand (from the Hindi) and Tagore (from the Bengali).

Since his founding of Writers Workshop, he published over 3000 volumes by Indian literary authors, mostly in the English language, including poetry, fiction, educational texts, screenplays, drama, "serious comics," and children's books, as well as audiobooks. Writers Workshop has published first books by many authors who went on to fame, including Vikram Seth, Pritish Nandy and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

His publishing enterprise was unusual in that he personally served as publisher, editor, reader, secretary, and editorial assistant. The books were also unique in appearance, being hand-typeset on local Indian presses, and bound in hand-loomed sari cloth. Writers Workshop continues to publish, under the direction of Lal's family members.

Some of the last works he was engaged in publishing were Holmes of the Raj by Vithal Rajan and Labyrinth by Arunabha Sengupta.

# The Poet

For all his wild hair like an aureole,  
Stammer at parties, slipping from a tram,  
Putting off the mending of a sole,  
And putting on a mock-heroic Damn!,  
He notices the spider's intestines  
Claim harlot, smuggler and blackmarketeer,  
And in the clicking grin his eye divines  
A moody world of artifice and fear.

Above all, this: When a woman turns  
Black clouds of hair, with a rhythmic hand  
Weaving their silk in the possessive sun,  
He sees her common eyes stretch to a land  
O lost, lost; as when repentance yearns  
For hope, and love, and finds that there is none.

Purushottama Lal