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Sahitya Akademi

meet the author

P. Lal





Lecturing in Augustana College

'When over twenty years ago *The Illustrated Weekly of India* began printing verse written by Indians, some names, probably known in more eclectic circles before, earned a wider recognition. P. Lal's name is considered one such. C. R. Mandy, its Irish-born ex-editor, could see a couple of lights in the fog of his self-esteem. That too was a great distinction. All accidents, according to Yeats, are acts of destiny. Lal, one of Mandy's discoveries, pursued the destined opportunity to organise a front of new poetry in India, and himself became a great explorer of talent. He gathered a few writers around him and described them as the *Writers Workshop*. How they conducted their proceedings, what role Lal played, whether there arose dissensions when so much sensitive talent came together, was Lal a guide or merely a cementing force, – these will be an important part of Indian literary history.' (S. Mokashi-Punekar, 1968)

The manifesto of the Workshop founded in Calcutta in 1958 described the school as 'a group of writers who agree in principle that English has proved its ability, as a language, to play a creative role in Indian literature, through original writings and transcreations'. The Workshop *Miscellany* was to be 'devoted to creative writing', giving

'preference to experimental work by young and unpublished writers'. The first anthology of these poets was *Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry* (1958), edited by P. Lal and K. Raghavendra Rao. In their introduction, the editors condemned 'greasy, weak-spined and purple-adjectived "spiritual poetry" and 'the blurred rubbery sentiments of ... Sri Aurobindo' and declared that 'the phase of Indo-Anglian romanticism ended with Sarojini Naidu'. They pleaded for a vital language which must not be a total travesty of the 'current pattern of speech'. They commended 'the effort of experiment', advocated a poetry that dealt in concrete terms with concrete experience', and emphasized 'the need for the private voice,' especially because 'we live in an age that tends so easily to demonstrations of mass-approval and hysteria'.

P. Lal's first collection of poems *The Parrot's Death and Other Poems* was published in 1960. A critic of K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar's eminence recognised Lal as 'a sensitive and accomplished lyric poet' as early as in 1962. Iyengar observed: 'He has schooled himself and trained his ear by steeping himself in the best modern English and American poetry. He is still young, he is ardent, and he was an eye for beauty. Familiar things yield rich significance to him'.

Regarding Lal's second collection of poems *Change ! They Said* (1966), M. K. Naik observed: 'The poet is seen to enter a world of increasing awareness of social realities and life's sorrows, and passes from "An encounter with God in a Rose Garden" to "the Refugees at Sealdah Station" and the "Middle class deploring/Economic disparity/ In the strangulated bus".'

In the 70's two books of poems *The Man of Dharma and the Rasa of Silence* (1974) and *Calcutta: A Long Poem* (1977) created a stir in critical and creative circles. The first, a long poem, traces Yudhishtira's passage 'though the spectrum of the eight



with daughter Srimati, wife Shyamasree, son Ananda and daughter-in-law Swati

rasas till he arrives at the *rasa* of silence; it was considered a unique poetic statement about modern times. The book on the metropolis of Calcutta is a 'curious amalgam of a poet's ambivalent relationship with the urban juggernaut, his persistent awareness of the ugliness, the boredom, the cruelty implied in the very living, and the beauty and glory that temper the whole attitude to the reality of being' (Lalit M. Sharma). In the 'Prelude' of the poem, there is a prayer-like query to the Beloved City:

When will your children not feed
On scraps in the festal dustbin?

The poet ends 'Prelude' with a litany-like note :

Bless the ghosts who sit in office
Bless the broken ghosts
bunched on benches in Outram Park.
Bless the ghosts broken
and unbandaged
Bless the ghosts broken by guilt...

In the essay (in the prose section) where the poet pays 'a tribute to a resilient fascinating total city' which he has made his 'permanent home', there is a significant observation of the Calcuttan mind:

the mind, subtle, lachrymose and fiery, of the Calcuttan : his green upsurges of sentiment, his fondness for lazy witticism, his brazenly splendid, insular self-consciousness, his easily-wounded pride, his dalliance with ideas and ideals.

In 1977 the *Collected Poems* of Lal was published. It contained all

that 'I wish to preserve of my mostly serious, sometimes semi-serious, and very occasionally mischievous and playful verse from 1937 till 1977.' In the 'Preface' of the collection, the poet gives his readers an idea of the growth and development of his mind and feeling :

'An intense adolescent "religious" experience, sparked off largely by the influence of the Jesuit Fathers in St Xavier's School and partly by the *Bhagavad Gita* which I first transcreated in 1947, is at the root of many of the early poems. The "God" invoked in them is a theologically hybrid but emotionally sound Catholic-Hindu Divinity. I have not – I think fortunately – yet recovered from the wondrous impact of that experience. Second : the embarrassing abundance of birds, bees, roses, apples, and rain, to which many viewers and critics have made amused reference. These creep, slide, and squeeze in in spite of my best efforts to keep the doors shut. I have granted them squatter's privileges. They spring from childhood memories of a Kapurthala estate in the Punjab, and the continuing resurrecting experience of the Bengal monsoon. Their presence makes high irony – a much beloved ingredient in modern poetry – difficult. I apologise for its lack in my verse. Third : all these poems are really love poems,

even the ones that do not have any explicit *sringara* theme – perhaps, strangely, specially those. God, nature, or the human beloved – whatever the “subject” or “theme” – poetry’s source is “com-*passion*” rooted in love, preferably of course mature. (To the extent that it is inspired by a creative vision and seeks order, satire too is loving.) I have allowed some very early love poems in the “Juvenilia” section, though I had rejected them previously as unworthy because sentimental and over-self-expressive. Now, after thirty or more years, they seem to be harmless; some, indeed, may actually help to “explain” my later verse of a similar but unmaawkish kind.’

Mahatma Gandhi has been a strong influence on Lal’s life and verse, prompting him to include a good number of elegies on Gandhiji in the book. The news of Gandhiji’s assassination – Lal was then nineteen – was a traumatic shock of such magnitude that for many days suicidal guilt feelings overpowered him and many of his college friends. Recovery, he felt, was possible only through confessional declaration. Lal actually wrote over a hundred long poems in an elegy-sequence. Lal feels that in certain areas of human

experience, extra-aesthetic considerations applied to artistic creations are perfectly in order. He does not like to suggest that this was an area of such experience; only that the assassination of Bapu made many of his contemporaries in college grow up very suddenly by giving them a cruel glimpse of real tragedy, not the literary kind ‘our learned professors so earnestly communicated to us.’ Lal believes that to have literary qualities as the *sole* criteria to judge the quality of a literary work sometimes can be as self-limiting as to have a *sole* political, social, or ‘psychological’ standard. Lal asserts that catharsis in art and catharsis in life are two very valuable but very different experiences.

In 1980, Lal’s condensed English version of *The Mahabharata of Vyasa* was published and as a companion to this volume *The Ramayana of Valmiki* was published in the following year. In both the books the transcreator employed the same principles of approach and handling. In the ‘Preface’ to the second volume Lal wrote: ‘I eschew the term “methodology” – too fancy and grandiose a description for what was intended to be really just a pleasure-giving version of Valmiki’s epic. ‘Lal’s



Playing with grandson Dhruva

sloka-by-sloka transcreation of the *Mahabharata* has appeared so far in 150 volumes (each around 60 pages), and will be completed in another 75 volumes. His transcreations of six Sanskrit Plays were published by New Directions, and of the *Dhammapada* by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Lal launched of the avatara of *The Miscellany*, *The New Miscellany*, a book-magazine, in 1990. *The New Miscellany*, like its predecessor, chooses not to accept advertising – ‘neither to be a party to the making of plush money by others, or to be even indirectly “influenced” by advertising clout’. The magazine hopes to take a firm aesthetic stand in the ‘current malaise of social, political, economic and literary flux’.

Lal believes that lyrical poetry is truly itself only when it begins to possess some of the qualities of prayer. He also subscribes to the ‘cliche’ that prayer is most likely to be effective when it is for and about others, not for oneself.

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CRITICISM

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With wife. photograph by Edward Rice

A CHRONOLOGY

1929 : Birth in Kapurthala, Punjab

1930 : Migrated to Calcutta with
his parents

1950 : *The Art of the Essay*, first
book of one hundred essays
published

1952 : Joined St Xavier's College as
Lecturer in English; now
Honorary Professor there

1955 : Married Shyamasree,
daughter of Kalidas Nag and
Santa Devi

1962-

63 : Special Professor of Indian
Studies at Hofstra
University, New York.

1966 : Delegate from India to the
P.E.N. International Writers
Conference in New York

1968 : Visiting Professor in the
University of Illinois

1969-

70 : Received Jawaharlal Nehru
Fellowship

1970 : Received the Padmashri
award

1971 : Visiting Professor of
Comparative Literature in
the Hofstra University

1972 : Distinguished Visiting
Professor and Consultant,
Albion College

1973 : Prentiss M. Brown
Distinguished Visiting
Professor, Albion College

1973-

74 : Robert Norton Visiting
Professor, Ohio University

1975 : Visiting Professor of Indian
Culture, Hartwick College

1977 : Eli Lilly Visiting Professor,
Berea College

Honorary Doctorate of
Letters, Western Maryland
College

1987 : Indian delegate to Asian
Poets Conference in Seoul
Invited to the Cambridge
Literary Seminar

1988 : World Poets Conference in
Bangkok

Indian Writers Delegation to
Sweden

1989 : Read his poems in the
Harbor Front Reading
Series, Toronto