

## reflections

# An Evening with Dominique Lapierre (Part 1)

by Dr A H Jaffor Ullah

*"Life is an opportunity, avail it  
Life is a beauty, admire it  
Life is a bliss, taste it  
Life is a dream, realize it"*  
- Mother Teresa

IT was early in the morning, March 26, 1999. I recalled that on this tenebrous day twenty-eight years ago a new day was dawning ushering a new era and a new identity for Bengalis of Padma-Meghna-Jamuna deltaic land. My thoughts were rushing back to the halcyon days of my youth. But a small news item in New Orleans' daily newspaper 'Times Picayune' brought me back to reality. The news item stated: "Loyola University New Orleans presents Dominique Lapierre - Humanitarian, Journalist (*Is Paris Burning?*), novelist (*City of Joy*). Friday, March 26, 7 p.m. Louis J. Roussel Performance Hall, Communications/Music Complex."

Immediately I decided to attend this lecture of Mr. Lapierre. Why shouldn't I attend this meeting? About two decades earlier in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, I bought his book "Freedom at Night," that he wrote in the 60s and 70s with his American reporter-friend Michel Collins. Just a month earlier I thoroughly enjoyed reading his novel "City of Joy." The memory of rickshapuller Hasri Pal still lingers in my mind.

I thought it would be neat to attend Lapierre's talk this evening. Perhaps I may ask him a question or two about Hasri Pal and other characters from his novel "City of Joy." As I was exiting my home I told my wife, "Dear, I wish you

I have seen Lapierre's picture enough times in the jacket of "Freedom at Midnight." I was self-assured that I shall be able to locate him when he arrives in the auditorium. A few minutes before 7'0 o'clock I noticed a couple of Lapierre's local friends were heading towards the front entrance of the hall. They headed that way to greet him with hugs and kisses. After the formalities were over, Lapierre came closer to the aisles where I was sitting. He looked at me and nodded his head to say hello. I rose from the seat and walked towards him. Before I could hardly open my mouth, he extended his right hand to shake my hand. I shook his hand and then with trepidation and a quivering voice I said, "Mr. Lapierre, it's nice to meet you."

were coming with me to New Orleans to hear this Banglaphile." She saw me carrying the old book "Freedom at Midnight" and also the new digital camera. "Do you want Lapierre to autograph this book?" She asked. I said, "Why not, after all, he is a humanist and a very famous chronicler of present-day world history."

Loyola University of New Orleans is a small school located in the uptown next to the famous Audubon Zoo. It took me about twenty minutes to drive up to Loyola campus from my office. I was half an hour early. But when I approached the 'Performance Hall' I saw two ladies waiting there already. One of them looked straight at me and asked, "Are you here for the Lapierre's talk?" I nodded my head. She said, "You're in the right place."

Within 15 minutes I saw more people coming to the entrance way of the hall. Lapierre spent two and a half year in New Orleans after the War in 1946. He was a teenager then. He came here from Paris with his family; his father was Consul General of France for the southern states of America. Thus, I expected some of his old friends to show up to

hear him after all these years. Lapierre's new book "A Thousand Suns" hit the bookstalls all over the world very recently. The book is already in the chart of best selling books in non-fiction category. He is now on a book tour promoting his book. But honestly Lapierre does not need to promote his book. These days he is very renowned all over the globe. His novel "City of Joy" based on his experiences of Calcutta slum 'Ananda Nagar' had captured the hearts and minds of many satisfied readers from four-corners of the globe. A movie was already made based on this novel. I was told that this book was translated in thirty languages. About 8 million copies were sold worldwide. Part of the royalty from this book is earmarked for benevolent projects to help the indigents of Ananda Nagar and other slum dwellers in Calcutta.

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Then I blurted out; "I'm a Bangalee from Bangladesh."

"Are you?" Lapierre's eye glowed; there was big broad smile on his face, which lingered for a while.

I knew the magic would work. Lapierre's have an unending love for Bengal. Calcutta is like a 'home away from home' for him. Lapierre's fascination with India, Bengal, and Calcutta is limitless. His legendary book 'City of Joy' exudes that sentiment page after page in that book, which had immortalized Hasri Pal, the rickshapuller. Of course, he lovingly calls him the 'Human Horse.'

"May I talk to you to you afterwards?" I politely threw that question

to him.

"Well, of course, I'll be looking forward to that." He grinned.

The crowd was not growing at the entrance of the auditorium. It was a good omen, I thought. Less attendee would mean greater chances that I could talk to him at length. Without thinking much I took my digital camera out of the pouch and confidently walked back to his seat. I said, "Do you mind if I take your picture, Mr. Lapierre? I would like to write a report on tonight's account and send it to Dhaka for some newspapers. Your picture may come handy."

Mr. Lapierre gleefully posed for the picture with his new book "A Thousand Suns" clasped in his right hand. After clicking the shutter, I said, "It's a digital camera. I should be able to send the image through the Internet to other side of the globe." I requested him to pose for another picture. He gleefully obliged. As I was counting to three Mr. Lapierre shot back, "Hello, Bangladesh, here I come." I could not resist my laugh. He had a good sense of humor, I reckoned.

As I was snapping more digital shots I saw more people entering the auditorium. Surprisingly, there was a bunch

of young college students among the gathered audiences. Dominique Lapierre is not a pop artist. Nevertheless, his writings are geared towards developing a common bondage among all humans — six billions strong — living in this tiny miniscule of island in the vast emptiness of this universe. Humanism has a broad appeal all through the West. Lapierre's fascination with the poor Bengali slum dwellers of Ananda Nagar is a testament of this.

Dominique Lapierre has one commodity to sell and that is his love and compassion for the poor. While other western reports quickly find filth in the slums of Bengal, he sees pristine beauty of humanity in action. In his book Ananda Nagar, Lapierre points out over and over again that the destitute people in the slum look after one another often times sharing their meager resources. You won't find that in Ballygang or Salt Lake in Calcutta nor will you find it in Baridhara-Gulshan in Dhaka. I bet the young collegegoers of New Orleans came this evening to hear some amazing stories of hardship and love the indigents had reserved for themselves. Lapierre had both the inquisitiveness and ability to dig up resplendent stories from the cesspool of humanity. And the audiences knew very well his masterful skill in storytelling. Does it surprise anyone that they have bartered a delightful spring evening for a mundane lecture from a near septuagenarian?

(End of part 1)

Dr. A.H. Jaffor Ullah writes from New Orleans, Louisiana, USA

## in memoriam

# Dr Panwhar: A Dedicated Writer, Social Worker

by Shaikh Aziz

SINDHI literature has lost a dedicated writer and social worker. He died on Thursday morning at the Civil Hospital, Jamshoro after a protracted illness. He was 50.

Humane, humble and inquisitive, Khan Mohammad was a man of many virtues. As a teacher, he always tried to help his students; as a scholar he had great enthusiasm for his subject and as a social worker he would lend assistance to any body who was in need. Although, paradox and collective apathy rendered him to a paralysed man in the final days of his life, his contribution in the various fields of learning and social service would be long remembered.

Born to a peasant family of village Araazi in Dadu district, Khan Moham-

mad had his early schooling at his village, and then in Bhan Saedabad, Hyderabad and Karachi. During his graduation he also joined journalism as a part time reporter and quickly picked up writing. He wrote a number of articles which appeared in various periodicals and journals. After his graduation from Sindh University, he did his Masters in Journalism from Karachi University. This coincided with the opening of the department of journalism in Sindh University, Jamshoro

where he joined as a teacher and finally became its chairman and remained there before he got ill and opting for premature retirement in 1998. He also remained on the editorial board of the Naeen Zindagi, a renowned Sindhi literary magazine which lost its previous standard after the death of Abdul Wahid Sindhi. He also founded a monthly journal Paras. In his pursuit for history and other relevant subjects, he closely associated with a number of literary figures like Pir Husamuddin

Rashdi, G. S. Sayed, and especially Shaikh Abdul Majeed Sindhi, whose contribution towards the society and literature inspired him to undertake research. It was his closeness with Shaikh Sindhi that he chose to make indepth study on the role Alwahid newspaper played in creating political awareness among the Sindhi Muslims and the freedom movement, especially in the struggle for the separation of Sindh from Bombay Presidency.

On the basis of his research on Al-

wahid he was awarded doctorate in journalism. In a society where historical evidence is scant and dubious, conducting research is quite a difficult task, Punwhar's is of pivotal importance for understanding the social and historical developments of pre-independence era. Since he came from a poor family, Khan Mohammad knew well the social and economic problems of the common man of Sindh. This became the driving force for his involvement in social service. He helped many

enthusiastic young people to establish libraries in villages and ensured its proper upkeep. For the ailing village people he would secure medication and arrange other help. In 1988, he suffered brain haemorrhage which had almost paralysed him. The Sindh government sent him for treatment to London where he was operated upon and had almost returned to normal, but the symptoms again showed signs of growth of a brain tumour in 1997. He was admitted to Civil Hospital Jamshoro where he remained bed-ridden for the past one-and-half year. He edited a number of books including one written on the life and struggle of Shaikh Abdul Majeed Sindhi, besides his commendable work on Alwahid.

Courtesy: The Dawn of Pakistan

## impressions

# Tagore's Songs are Sans Frontiers

by Saber Reza Karim

BACK in 1952, I took a memorable train ride from Karachi to Lahore. I recall the journey for two reasons, the first one was that I was on my way to join the Civil Service Academy at Lahore and secondly for the event that took place during that journey.

The train started on time in the afternoon on its way to Lahore and on to Peshawar. There was no air-conditioned coach at that time. There were two more passengers in that first class compartment, one young person in the beret cap and a white haired bearded gentleman deeply engrossed in a book. The young man seemed eager to converse and soon we started exchanging information about each other. His name was Sayeed Khan. An engineer in Karachi Development Authority he was travelling to his home town. Abbottabad in the Frontier Province.

He moved nearer to face me so that we could hear each other's voices over the clackety-click sound of the railway coach.

"You come from Bengal, you must be knowing Tagore songs?" he eagerly asked.

"Yes; but I am a bathroom singer," I replied.

"So am I" said Sayeed and laughed heartily.

"Do you happen to know 'Yad Auye Kina Aye Tumhare?' He inquired. "Yes and the original Bengali song too," I responded.

"Then please sing" he pleaded. I hesitated but there was nothing else to do during the long journey ahead. So I started to sing slowly.

"Very nice, very nice," he appreciated, "but a bit louder please so that I can hear the words above the rattling noise."

As I finished the first part of the

song on a louder note, he suddenly joined in with the Bengali words, "Phaguner Phool Jai Jharia, Phaguner Aboshane." It was an interesting combination of the same tune being sung in two languages. As soon as we had finished, I exclaimed, "But you did not tell me you knew Bengali."

"No, I don't," he said and then came his unique explanation.

"I like Tagore songs so much that I listen to the records in Bengali over and over again and try to copy the words. But I don't know the meaning of words, except in songs like this one where a Hindi version is also available."

I was taken aback at the thought of the efforts he had put in to listen Tagore songs to learn the words as well as the tunes.

I started enquiring about Tagore songs which were known to him and singing snatches of songs known to both of us. Thus started a musical evening of amateur singers of Rabindrasangeet with the clattering sounds of the train often drowning our voices. But when the train stopped at a station, we continued with lowered voices.

Sayed's repertoire of Tagore songs was impressive considering the fact that these were in a language not known to him and his love for the tunes made him learn the songs. I told him that Tagore's words were even more important and it was the weaving of poetic phrases and lilting tunes set by the poet himself that made Tagore songs so appealing. Sayeed agreed and said that he had read the English version of Gitanjali and had learnt the tunes of some of the songs from a friend in Karachi who had migrated to India. I mentioned the background of "Anandaloke" and song it together attempting harmonization. He was fascinated by the meaning of the

song "Ananda Dhara Bahiche Bhubane," and wanted to pick up the tune. He had some difficulty in the beginning but succeeded after repeated efforts.

Sayed said, "I want to learn the meaning of many more songs. So, if I write to you could you please help me with the meanings." I said, "Sure, it would be my pleasure," and gave him my address at Lahore. He thanked me profusely and looked forward to meet me sometime in future.

I was suddenly conscious about a pang of hunger and asked him about how to get some food. He looked at his watch and said, "It's past midnight, the dining car is closed. If you don't mind, I have some biscuits and tea in my flask. I would be delighted if you could please share these with me. I gladly nodded and shared the biscuits and tea to quench my thirst and hunger.

After our midnight snack we again launched into the two man musical session with gusto. He had picked up parts of *Khoru Baiyau Bot Bege*. When we were singing "Hai Maro Maro Tan Haiyo Haiyo Haiyo," suddenly the old gentleman from the upper hearth shouted, "Will you please stop your music session. It's nearly two clock and I can't sleep."

Though my first reaction was to retort back but I immediately realised that he had every right to sleep and our post-midnight singing session should not disturb his sleep. We both said, "Sorry, we had not noticed the time. We said 'Khoda Hafez' to each other. As I lay down rocking on my berth, I recalled with amazement the mesmerizing effect of Tagore's songs that brought two strangers on a train together and took them through the mazes of haunting tunes of Rabindrasangeet beyond hunger, time and other barriers.

## profile

# Nadine Gordimer: A Profile

by A S M Nurunnabi

NADINE Gordimer, winner of the 1991 Nobel prize for literature, was born and brought up in South Africa. She is widely known as an eminent writer of fiction whose novels and stories are mainly set in her native South Africa. Ever since she began her writing career in 1937, her steady flow of fiction has reflected the constantly changing social, moral, and political condition of life in South Africa.

Although she travelled and lectured extensively outside South Africa, Gordimer has continued to live in Johannesburg. Together with her decision to remain in the then authoritarian, segregated society came her constant examination of the roles open to whites in the apartheid-ridden society of that time.

In her early work Gordimer analysed white complicity in the injustices of the segregated system in spite of the more or less "decent" intentions of many of her comparatively well-meaning characters. In her work of the 1950s and early 1960s she investigated the false hopes created by liberalism—as a political programme—among those whites who opposed the then existing regime. The dead end created by the failure of liberalism became the topic of her work in the late 1960s and 1970s, and with this change in topic came a new interest in the psychology of her characters, both of the ruling class and of the group who tried — mainly unsuccessfully — to improve the situation.

In her early and middle career Gordimer portrayed both blacks and whites as helpless victims of a brutally stratified society; "civilised" white were shown as capable of little more than token sympathy for their black servants;

the private tragedies of blacks rarely perturbed more than the surface of a bland, decorous white world.

In her short stories, throughout her career, Gordimer didn't deal solely with the political themes that inform all her novels. In both short stories and novels there is the same accuracy of detail, almost invariably tied to an emotional reaction; a sense of loss, of impotence, and—occasionally—of vitality and courage. But in the stories she frequently builds a personal tale around a fleeting and sharply focused moment of revelation or insight. These concise evocations of the vital, the ephemeral, or the corrosive element in various relationships give a range to her writing far beyond that of the predominantly social themes for which she is well known.

After 1979, when she published 'Burger's Daughter', she began to incorporate a demand for politically committed action into her depiction of the complex involvement of whites in apartheid politics. That insistence has grown in her later analyses of both the violent reality in South Africa and her vision of the revolutionary future. One major change between these later works and the fiction of her early and middle career is that the power to enforce change came in the hands of blacks. Gordimer's investigations then focused on how whites can adapt to a situation in which their role in a historically inevitable "liberation" is of necessity secondary, although nonetheless demanding or dangerous for that.

Gordimer's only novel set entirely outside South Africa, 'A Guest of Honour', was the first to investigate the need for commitment by a white protagonist,

even though he is an expatriate "guest" working as a consultant in the newly independent African country in which he once served as a sympathetic colonial official. In that work the historically accurate debate in the fictional African country over the merits of socialism or neo-colonial capitalism informs both the public and the personal dilemma of the central character. Gordimer's ability to incorporate into her fiction an analysis of the "real" political debate of any period is a distinctive feature of her later work. Typical of this trait is 'Burger's Daughter', in which historical accuracy is combined with a hauntingly vivid evocation of the protagonist's fictional personal world.

Gordimer's later work not only shows an increasingly radical political emphasis, but also an increasingly sure manipulation of fictional form. From 'The Conservationist' on, her controlled variations of point of view and narrative voice work a startling vividness and resonance.

Throughout her career Gordimer has maintained that her fiction is "truthful". In a much-quoted statement from her essay "Living in the Interregnum", she stated, "I remain a writer, not a public speaker, nothing I say here will be as true as my fiction."

There are other aspects of her talents. She has extraordinary ability to illuminate the connection between the personal and the political in the divided society of South Africa. With compassion and scrupulous honesty, she penetrates to the core of the human heart, revealing the subtlest feelings of her characters —black and white, revolutionaries and racists, adulterers, spinsters, and lovers.

A S M Nurunnabi is a regular contributor of The Daily Star