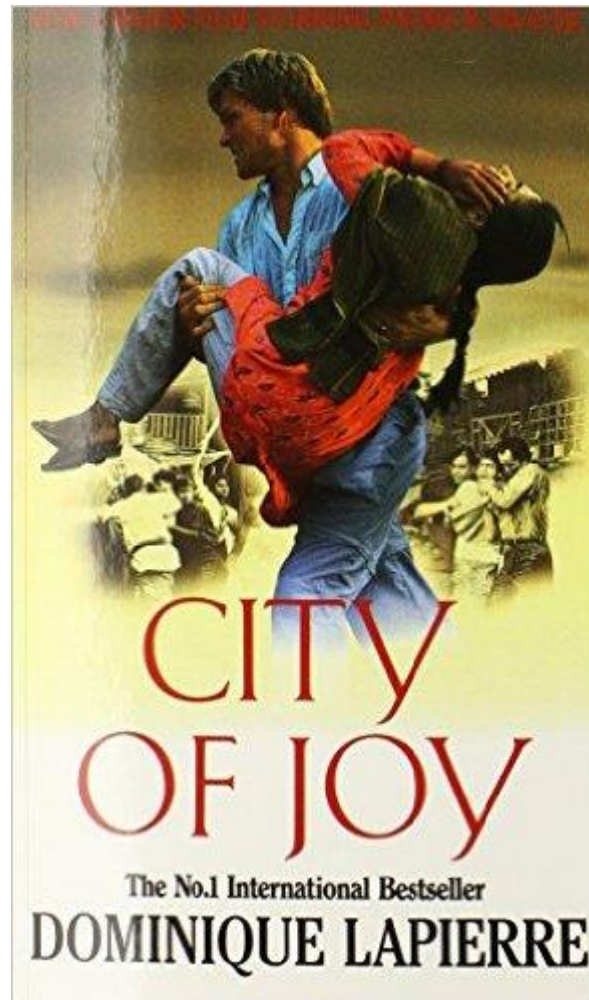


**Calcutta (Kolkata) - the City of Pulsating Lives:
A Critical Study of *The City of Joy* by Dominique Lapierre**

Dr. Dhananjoy Roy, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

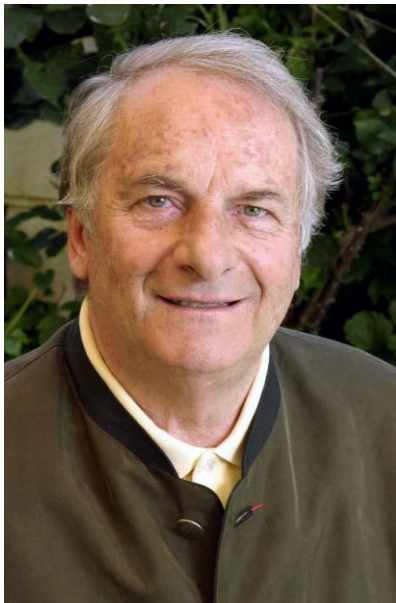


City of Calcutta

Since its earliest days, the city of Kolkata (Calcutta) has always been a target for derogatory remarks especially by the Western or European tourists, diplomats, and rulers. R. P. Gupta in the “Introduction” to Raghubir Singh’s *Calcutta: The Home and the Street* (1988) notes

how a British ruler in India like Robert Clive criticized the city of Calcutta by calling it “the most wicked place in the universe,” and how Winston Churchill expressed his aversion for the city by saying to his mother: “I shall always be glad to have seen it . . . for the . . . reason . . . that it will be unnecessary for me ever to see it again,” and even how a great writer of the West like Gunter Grass in *The Flounder* (1977) commented upon the city thus: “. . . this crumbling, scabby, swarming city, this city that eats its own excrement. . . It wants its misery . . . People . . . have daily diarrhea: white shirted maggots in a shit pile with Victorian excrescences, a shit pile that dreams up new curlicues every minute” (Gupta 1). Gunter Grass, notwithstanding, came to Calcutta twice; first in 1987 when he stayed in the city for a period of six months, and then in 2005 when he stayed here for a week.

Dominique Lapierre



Dominique Lapierre

Courtesy: <http://www.babelio.com/auteur/Dominique-Lapierre/5637>

Though being a European himself, Dominique Lapierre however does not have any favour for such European or Western personalities, nor even for those Western tourists who visit the city of Calcutta and criticize it with unkind words before or after leaving the city. He makes clear his feelings about the opinions of such visitors to Calcutta from the West in the

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“Introduction” to Raghu Rai’s *Calcutta* (1989), a collection of photographs of Calcutta when he states that to know the city of Calcutta is “to attempt an adventure” for which one needs “courage and perseverance” (Raghu Rai 8), and not a feeling of aversion towards the city. The way he speaks about Western visitors who make bitter comments about the city of Calcutta without knowing the city fully well is significant:

Ah Calcutta, burdened with the stigma of despair! Ah Calcutta, reviled as the greatest urban disaster on this planet, a hell on earth. Ah Calcutta, even the Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, called you a dying city. Ah Calcutta, the graffiti on your walls confirm that no hope is left, only anger. Ah Calcutta, in their thirst for justice millions of your children have finally embraced communism’s promises of salvation. The horrified expression on the face of the American tourist I see coming out of the Grand Hotel, the local palace with its palm-fringed swimming pool, mirrors the truth of many of these accusations.

But what this stranger able to see of Calcutta, before getting back into her air-conditioned taxi, which in a few minutes would take her to her plane bound for New York? . . . Calcutta does not easily shed its horror. You will need courage and perseverance if you want to attempt the adventure of getting to know Calcutta (Raghu Rai 8).

Lapierre does have the “courage and perseverance” to undertake the adventure of getting to know Calcutta and its people from the very grass root level, and for this he spent several years in this city. This certainly finds reflection in his novel *The City of Joy* (1999). Kiran Manohar’s account in his review article “An Epic Venture into the Soul of humanity” is worth mentioning in this context:

I remember a time when there were many protest in Calcutta, on the streets, in the newspapers, on the television against the contents of this book [*The City of Joy*]. People at that time felt that it was a degrading account of their city written with an intention of harming the image of Calcutta and India in general. I read

this book specifically because of this, to judge for myself the truth behind those criticisms, and frankly I was curious too . . . and now, having read it, I must say that, nowhere in those pages have I seen any such intent by the author. In fact, it is a very realistic portrayal of facts by a great person who loved India and made the slum his home and helped all those people, who in turn worshipped him.

Prejudiced, Partial and Often Negative

The opinion about an Eastern city like Calcutta expressed by the Western tourists, however, may be considered to be typically Orientalist for two major causes. First, most of these views are prejudiced, partial and often negative, for as J. A. Cuddon in his *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (1998) has indicated, “Much of the discourse of Orientalism has been partial and prejudiced and often condescending (especially that originating from government servants, colonial officers, political agents/rulers et al).” “. . . a certain arrogance and a sense of superiority — a ‘we know best’ attitude — on the part of the West towards the East” (Cuddon 622) that Cuddon also points out as a common feature of the Orientalist perspective can also be noted in the reactions of the Western tourist-critics of the city of Calcutta.

Facile Knowledge Or Information

Second, most of the Western views on the city of Calcutta and its people are the products of a facile knowledge or information gathered by the viewers or the tourists from the West, in keeping with what Edward Said in his seminal work, *Orientalism* (1978) described as “textural generalization” (Said 2) of Orientalism. Dominique Lapierre, who clearly does not have any faith in the “facile generalization” (Said 2) of the Western views on Calcutta, however, in a sense is himself an Orientalist and his novel, *The City of Joy* is a work of Orientalism, for as Said puts it “Any one who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient . . . either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism” (Said 2). Nevertheless, it needs to be pointed out that Lapierre does not have any concern for whole of the Orient in his novel but concentrates only on a specific part of it: the city of Calcutta and its people, especially the slum dwellers in the city. Also, it will not be the concern of this study to look at Lapierre as an Orientalist. Rather, it will be the present writer’s endeavour in this paper to study how

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Lapierre, being a European himself, looks at and represents the city of Calcutta in *The City of Joy*.

Foreword in *The City of Joy*

Lapierre's novel which the author himself, in the "Foreword" to the New Millennium Edition, describes as "an epic about the soul of humanity," and a novel that was endorsed by Pope John Paul II as "a lesson of hope and faith for the world," tells the story of the devastated lives of slum dwellers in the city of Calcutta who have only hope, love, joy and humanity as the means of their lives. The blurb of the same edition of the novel describes the book as:

This is the story of living saints and heroes — those who abandoned affluent and middle-class lives to dedicate themselves to the poor. And it is a testament to the people of the City of Joy. Their tragedies will move you, but their faith, generosity, and most of all, boundless love will lift you, bless you, and possibly change your life.

The City of Joy, the Novel

This novel, which was filmed by the British director Roland Joffé and the Canadian producer Jake Elberts in 1991, was the product of "extensive research" done by Dominique Lapierre himself on the slum dwellers in the city of Calcutta and in some other parts of Bengal over the years 1982 and 1983, and it was given the form of a novel by the author-researcher himself thereafter in 1984. In the "Author's Note" in this book, he speaks about this research clearly:

My story about the City of Joy is based on two years of extensive research in Calcutta and various areas of Bengal. I was given access to personal diaries and correspondence, and the bulk of my research, consisted of over two hundred lengthy interviews, conducted through interpreters in various languages including Hindi, Bengali, and Urdu. These interviews, which I transcribed into English and French, are the basis for the dialogues and testimonies in this book (Lapierre xv).

In talking about the alterations he made in the names of the protagonists and of certain situations in the novel from his real research work, Lapierre clarifies quite frankly that

The protagonists of the City of Joy [the name he gives the slum] wished to remain anonymous. Therefore, I have, purposely changed the identities of some characters and certain situations. The story I tell here is, however, true to the confidences that the people of the City of Joy have shared with me, and to the spirit of this unusual place (Lapierre xvi).

Life Experience

Certainly the story that this novel tells is true to the life experiences of the poor people who live in slums in the city of Calcutta. The name Lapierre gives the slum which is the locale of his narrative is “City of Joy”, which is actually a literal translation of the Bengali name, “Ananda Nagar”. However, it is important to note that none of the three thousand odd slums in the city of Calcutta bears this name, and that “Ananda Nagar” – “City of Joy” is actually based on the sprawling Pilkhana slum located in Howrah, a town situated across the river Ganges and opposite Kolkata. But *The City of Joy* is actually far more than a novel detailing the misery and the suffering of the slum dwellers in a metropolitan city like Calcutta. Lapierre does represent the poverty-stricken lives of the slum dwellers, but he also celebrates the power of their will to win over almost every obstacle in their lives. Indeed, Lapierre shows that the slum dwellers’ lives are sustained by their immense capacity for love and joy, humanism and altruism, irrespective of the constraints of religion, gender or class.

Pictures of the Present Day City

But even if the action of the novel is centered on a slum, the whole work projects a series of distinct pictures of the present day city of Kolkata. In this, Lapierre’s vision is truly panoramic, for he includes not only perspectives like the one which sees Kolkata as the city of lost glory, and of the most degrading poverty, but also one which celebrates the metropolis’ capacity for joy, love, tolerance, and humanity. Different visions of the city fill the pages of Lapierre’s novel, and he calls Calcutta the city of the “human horse”, and refers to it as a site of the direst inhumanity. *The City of Joy* further represents Calcutta as a city of mirages and

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illusions, as one pulsating with life, and as one that breathes with multitudes of faiths and festivities, as a major business centre and as a hub for such illegal trades like that of the selling of human embryos and fetuses. Finally, there is also in the novel a typification of the city of Kolkata in terms of the goddess Kali, a deity who is equally merciful and unmerciful, benevolent and gracious, but gruesome and violent.

The Plot

Lapierre, however, sets the plot of his novel in a slum and he proceeds to reflect upon the texture of human life in this marginal part of the city. This novelistic strategy conforms to what Blanche Gelfant in *The American City Novel* (1954) has typified as the “ecological” type of city novels, a category “which focuses upon one small spatial unit such as a neighbourhood or city block and explores in detail the manner of life identified with this place” (Gelfant 11). It may be mentioned in passing that the “ecological” type is one of the three types of city novels as categorized by Gelfant, the other two being the “Portrait” type and the “Synoptic” type. The small area or “spatial unit” of the city of Calcutta that Lapierre selects, is “one of the principal and oldest of Calcutta’s slums” (Lapierre 44), one that is “situated in the suburbs, a fifteen minutes’ walk from the [Howrah] railway station” (Lapierre 44). This slum is “wedged between a railway embankment, the Calcutta-Delhi highway, and two [jute] factories” (Lapierre 44) on the bank of the river Hooghly, and the novelist informs the reader that it had its genesis in the act of the owner of one of the jute factories “who, at the beginning of the [20th] century, had lodged his workers on this land which he had reclaimed from a fever-invested marsh, [and] had christened the place Anand Nagar, or ‘City of Joy’” (Lapierre 44).

The jute factory like hundreds of other factories in the city had closed down several decades earlier, but the slum Anand Nagar had not been demolished; rather, to quote the author, “the original workers’ estate had expanded to become a veritable city within a city” (Lapierre 44). More than seventy thousand people are said to reside in this slum. And these slum dwellers believe in various religions, including Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Christianity. Since the total area of this small slum is “hardly three times the size of a football field” (Lapierre 44), it is a wonder that around ten thousand families, divided zone-wise according to their

respective religions, live here in such a small area, and that too with joy, peace and love, if not with lavishness since every moment of their lives is marked by hardship. The author has allotted a full chapter (Chapter 7) of the novel to describe the utter destitution of the slum dwellers of the city of Calcutta and especially of Anand Nagar. A small part of his description of the hardships endured daily by the poor slum dwellers may be cited here:

Everything in these slums combined to drive their inhabitants to abjection and despair: shortage of work and chronic unemployment, appallingly low wages, the inevitable child labour, the impossibility of saving, debts that could never be redeemed, the mortgaging of personal possessions and their ultimate loss sooner or later. There was also the total non-existence of any reserve food stocks and the necessity to buy in minute quantities — one cent's worth of salt, two or three cent's worth of wood, one match, a spoonful of sugar — and the total absence of privacy with ten or twelve people sharing a single room (Lapierre 43).

The Slum

Lapierre significantly calls this slum a “poverty stricken industrial suburb” (Lapierre 43), and he describes in detail the standard of life there:

With its compounds of low houses constructed around minute courtyards, its red-tiled roof, and its rectilinear alley-ways, the City of Joy did indeed look more like an industrial suburb than a shantytown. Nevertheless it boasted a sad record — it had the densest concentration of humanity on this planet, two hundred thousand people per square mile. It was a place where there was not even one tree for three thousand inhabitants, without a single flower, a butterfly, or a bird, apart from vultures and crows — it was a place where children did not even know what a bush, a forest, or a pond was, where the air was so laden with carbon dioxide and sulphur that pollution killed at least one member in every family, a place where men and beasts baked in a furnace for the eight months of summer until the monsoon transformed their alleyways and shacks into lakes of mud and excrement; a place where leprosy, tuberculosis, dysentery and all the malnutrition

diseases, until recently, reduced the average life expectancy to one of the lowest in the world; a place where eighty-five hundred cows and buffaloes tied up to dung heaps provided milk infected with germs (Lapierre 44-45).

One of the major hardships that the slum dwellers face in their lives is their poverty. Every day, and indeed every moment of the lives of the people in the City of Joy is lived in extreme poverty. Many of the bread earning members of the ten thousand ill-fated families living in Anand Nagar often fail to earn the minimum amount of money necessary to buy a handful of rice and *dal* to feed their families twice a day. The author's statistics regarding the real-life experiences of these poor people in the city makes his picture all the more realistic:

Above all, however, the City of Joy was a place where the most extreme economic poverty ran rife. Nine out of ten of its inhabitants did not have a single rupee per day with which to buy half a pound of rice (Lapierre 45).

The Misery

The lives of the slum dwellers of Calcutta are so miserable that they are often compelled to take to various antisocial and even criminal means to earn their livelihood. Lapierre shows in the text how the poor people of the slum seldom bother about moral compunctions in selling their blood to the private blood banks, in disposing off the bones of their dead to certain medical clinics, and even selling human embryos and fetuses. Such unethical means of earning a livelihood very often appears to them to be the only chance of survival in the city. Sometimes the poor inhabitants of the slum sacrifice their own lives for earning a few rupees to save the lives of the other members in their families, as Selima does in the novel.

But their misery is so common to them that “their poverty itself . . . [had] become a form of culture” (Lapierre 44). And not only poverty alone, but every hardship in the lives of the poor slum dwellers is finely counterbalanced by some other “factors” that allow them “not merely to remain fully human but even to transcend their condition and become models of humanity”

(Lapierre 43). In his two years of research on the slum dwellers in the city of Calcutta and the rest of Bengal, Lapierre came across evidence of how:

In these slums people actually put love and mutual support into practice. They knew how to be tolerant of all creeds and castes, how to give respect to a stranger, how to show charity towards beggars, cripples, lepers and even the insane (Lapierre 43-44).

Help for the Weak

Thus in *The City of Joy* Anand Nagar is a place where “the weak” are “helped, not trampled upon,” “orphans are instantly adopted by their neighbours” and “old people” are “cared for and revered by their children” (Lapierre 44). Here “The poor of Calcutta” are “not uprooted”; rather they live and share everything “in a communal world” and respect “its social and religious values, maintaining their ancestral traditions and beliefs” (Lapierre 44). The slum dwellers of the City of Joy all have an indomitable power of endurance by which they can smilingly confront and triumph over any hardship and/or any hurdle in their lives. It is because of this that they can tolerate the insufferable, and can even conquer utter destitution. *The City of Joy* provides many such instances that show the immeasurable power of endurance in the slum dwellers of Calcutta. One such incident may be cited here for the sake of the present discussion. A ten-year old Muslim boy Sabia’s death agony from osteo-tuberculosis compels Stephen Kovalski, the Polish priest and Sabia’s neighbour in Anand Nagar being to protest against God for the suffering of the poor little boy: “Why this agony of an innocent in a place already scarred by so much suffering?” (Lapierre 103). Every evening Sabia’s agonized cries rise to such a height that Kovalski initially succumbs to “cowardice” (Lapierre 103) in vainly trying to shut up his ears with cotton wool. But finally, it is Sabia’s power of endurance — his indomitable ability to conquer all physical suffering — to which Kovalski heartily surrenders. He then realizes: “It was our suffering that the boy was enduring, Isaiah affirmed — and he would help to save us from our sins” (Lapierre 103). This infinite and indomitable vitality, which allows Sabia to ascend above all the torments and agonies of the mortal world, is innately present in every slum dweller in the City of Joy. Their ability to triumph over physical suffering teaches us a lesson of how to confront all the

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sufferings of the mundane world with a smiling face. Thus does Stephen Kovalski get his final lesson from the little ailing but smiling boy when he fails in his attempt to lessen Sabia's death agony by administering morphine:

Sabia had no need of morphine. His features were imbued with a peace that quite disarmed me. Bruised, mutilated, crucified as he was, he remained undefeated. He had just given me the most precious gift of all: a secret reason never to despair, a light in the darkness (Lapierre 105-106).

In another place in the novel too, Kovalski also gets a similar realization about the inestimable power of endurance of the slum dwellers of Anand Nagar when, in one monsoon day in the leper colony of the slum, he meets Anouar, a young leprosy patient with an amputated foot, who is frantically trying to save himself from being drowned by the rain water by standing on one charpoy though being "half immersed in water" (Lapierre 460). Kovalski becomes completely dumbfounded by the "stoical almost cheery attitude" (Lapierre 460) of this suffering boy and he realizes:

These lights of the world really deserve their place next to the Father. . . They have been to the very ends of suffering (Lapierre 460).

Strong Pulse of Life

Burton Pike in an essay titled "The City as Image" published in his book, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* (1981) says: "The city has often been celebrated as the place where the pulse of life is strongly felt" (Pike 6). This "pulse of life" can "strongly [be] felt" even in the lives of the slum dwellers of Anand Nagar in Lapierre's novel. In his research on the people of the slums in Calcutta, Lapierre observed that they had "So much energy! So much vitality! So much zest for living!" (Lapierre 289), notwithstanding the countless hardships which they face every day in their lives. He thus appropriately concludes:

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These men and women were life itself. LIFE in capital letters, the life that throbbed, the life that vibrated in them as it vibrated everywhere else, in this most blessed of cities, Calcutta (Lapierre 289).

In his “Introduction” to Raghu Rai’s *Calcutta* (1989), Lapierre further speaks about the reality of the immeasurable vitality present in the lives of the poor slum dwellers of Calcutta:

You [foreign tourists who pass harsh comments on the city] expected death [in the city of Calcutta], yet you find life. LIFE in capital letters. Pulsating life, swirling, thrilling, trembling — vibrant as nowhere else in the world. Life is everywhere, it reigns and commands. Life assails you, invades all your senses with its insane noises, its smells, its touches, with countless spectacles it provides. This life will make you see the miracle it is, will make you understand its mystery a little better. And I swear that this city is, above all, a homage to life (Raghu Rai 8).

Rhythm and Dignity

Sukanta Chaudhuri, who otherwise criticizes Lapierre’s *The City of Joy* and says “Dominique Lapierre is disappointed with Calcutta” (Chaudhuri 11), has to acknowledge too the endless vitality of the slum dwellers of Calcutta when he comments in his *View from Calcutta* (2002):

It is also true that at whatever deplorable level, the lives of the urban poor have a rhythm, a viability, hence — I admit the mortifying irony of the world — a certain dignity (Chaudhuri 11).

The “rhythm” and “certain dignity” that Chaudhuri here talks about are obviously present in the lives of the poor slum dwellers of Anand Nagar in Lapierre’s novel. No doubt, the slum dwellers are very poor and wretched, and they may not have either sufficient food, or even a minimum standard of living, or the both, but they have nonetheless immense energy to fight with and defeat all hazards of life. Moreover, their infinite vigour inspires others too to fight with all

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difficulties of life. Needless to say, Lapierre's narrative too represents this irrefutable truth of the lives of the slum dwellers of Kolkata. Thus Stephen Kovalski's note in his diary about a blind and old leper woman who always prays "for other people, to help them endure their own suffering" (Lapierre 107), is a kind of self-confession for being himself revitalized by the vivacity of the slum dwellers of Anand Nagar:

Her [of the blind old leper] suffering is like that of Christ on the Cross; it is constructive and redemptive. It is full of hope. Every time I leave the hovel where my sister, the blind leper woman, lives, I come away revitalized. So how can one despair in this slum of Anand Nagar? In truth this place deserves its name City of Joy (Lapierre 108).

In fact, it is the immense capacity of the slum dwellers of Kolkata to enjoy the essence of life amidst countless personal, social, economic and even political hazards that makes their slum a veritable city of joy. Kiran Manohar too in his essay emphasizes on this point when he notes: "An amazing place like Ananda Nagar is full of life."

Essential Aspect of the Lives

Lapierre's envisioning of this essential aspect of the lives of the slum dwellers of Kolkata makes his work a distinct one from that of the other novelists writing in English who have represented the city of Calcutta in their novels, especially Kunal Basu in his *The Opium Clerk* (2001), Amitav Ghosh in his two novels *The Shadow Lines* (1988), and *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), Amit Chaudhuri in his *A Strange and Sublime Address* (2001) and *Freedom Song* (2001) and Saranath Banerjee in his novel *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* (2007).

Lapierre's novel also reveals an economic dimension of the city of Calcutta. But it is also important to note that Lapierre does not depict the city of Calcutta as an industrial city, and neither does he represent the industrial urban life of Calcutta in his novel. Nevertheless he has projected an image of the city as a major centre for a variety of economic resources for the

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millions of its inhabitants. Calcutta, it is shown in the novel, like any other city in the world, serves as an important locus for a multiplicity of professions for an enormous number of people: poor, middle-class, rich etc. Every class of people is engaged in one profession or the other in this city. *The City of Joy* in its pages mentions at least sixteen types of occupations including pottery, usury, pulling of hand-rickshaw, taxi driving, tea-shop-keeping, rag-picking, prostitution, trafficking in clandestine professions like the selling of human embryos and fetuses, owner of hand rickshaws and taxis, *munshigiri* (collecting rent from hand rickshaw pullers.) etc. that are followed by different characters in the novel.

To sum up, however, Kiran Manohar's view on Lapierre's novel may again be cited here: In fact, it [*The City of Joy*] is a very realistic portrayal of facts by a great person who loved India and made the slum his home and helped all those people, who in turn worshipped him. . . [The] *City of Joy* is a fascinating book with fascinating account by the author.

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