

Dominique Lapierre's connection with India

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In news– Dominique Lapierre, the acclaimed French author and Padma Bhushan awardee, passed away recently.

A brief note on him-

- Lapierre was born on July 30, 1931, at Chatelailon in France.
- His father's job as a diplomat led to a peripatetic childhood for Lapierre, who spent a considerable part of his youth hitchhiking and travelling across the United States and doing odd jobs to fund his travels.
- It was around this time that Lapierre developed a flair for writing. His travelogues would often be published in papers in the US.
- At 18, Lapierre received a **Fulbright scholarship to study economics at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania.**
- Afterwards, he began his career as a **reporter for the weekly news magazine, Paris-Match.**
- In 1954, when he was 23 and serving in the French army, Lapierre met a young American named Larry Collins, a Yale graduate who later became a journalist with Newsweek. The two went on to forge a deep friendship that later also translated into a successful literary partnership.
- **Together, Lapierre and Collins wrote six bestselling books, including O Jerusalem! (1972) on the creation of the state of Israel; Freedom at Midnight (1975); Is Paris Burning? (1965), on the liberation of Paris during World War II, which sold close to 10 million copies in 30 languages; The Fifth Horseman (1980); Is New York Burning? (2005); and Or I'll Dress You In Mourning**

(1968).

His connections with India-

- Lapierre had a special bond with India, travelling through the country and spending a lot of time in the city that was then called Calcutta, as well as in Bhopal.
- He was awarded the Padma Bhushan, India's third highest civilian award, in 2008.
- **City of Joy, the novel that made him a household name in the country, was set in the slums near Howrah in West Bengal.**
- In the aftermath of the success of the novel, Lapierre set up the **City of Joy Foundation** and donated a large share of his royalties to it to support humanitarian projects in West Bengal, which included the setting up of dispensaries, care centres for those suffering from leprosy and tuberculosis, hospital boats, schools and rehabilitation centres.
- Lapierre **spoke Bengali** fluently and would often travel in rickshaws on his visits to the city.
- **His investigative account, Five Past Midnight in Bhopal: The Epic Story of the World's Deadliest Industrial Disaster (1997; English translation in 2001),** written in collaboration with Javier Moro, traced the 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy and the role of Union Carbide in it.
- The royalties from the sale of the book were directed to a NGO clinic in Bhopal, which provides free medical treatment to the victims of the tragedy.
- The author also **set up a primary school in the Oriya Basti colony in Bhopal,** a neighbourhood that features prominently in the book.
- However, the book also became controversial. In July 2009, a defamation suit was filed against Lapierre and Moro. It was later lifted by the Madhya Pradesh High Court in October 2009.

- Perhaps the **best known of Lapierre's works centred on India is Freedom at Midnight, (with Collins) which told the story of India's struggle for independence** and the great humanitarian tragedy of the Partition.
- The authors interviewed a large number of people with first-hand knowledge of the events of those years, and was stylistically similar to their earlier works on Jerusalem and Paris.