

YASMIN PASCUAL KHALIL

Jilian Haslam: the Briton ‘Kolkata girl’

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“I had no idea then that another world even existed,” says Jillian Haslam. “I wasn’t aware that there was anything better or beyond the slum. What I did know was that I had to get away. And that I think is the key to anyone’s success. Refusing to accept the circumstances that you find yourself in.”

JILIAN HASLAM: THE BRITON WHO CALLS HERSELF A ‘KOLKATA GIRL’



Haslam is an author, philanthropist, and motivational speaker, who overcome a lot of hardships to rise from the grimy slums of Kolkata and move to London in the 90s. The 43-year old shared her experiences in the autobiography ‘Indian.English’, based on which Neil O’ Neil, British screenplay writer has made a script.

“The film would be based on my life and my book,” Haslam was quoted saying. “The script is ready and casting would go on shortly. Seven production houses have shown interest in making the film but we are yet to finalize one of them.”

The Anglo-Indian was born in 1970 to a British Army Officer stationed at Dum Dum, Kolkata. Expecting a comfy life in India just as in the colonial days, her parents chose not to return to England. But things didn’t go as planned, Haslam as a child lost four of her siblings to poverty and ended up wandering the streets, going under staircases and behind people’s houses before ending up in the slums of Kidderpore and living there until the age of 17.

Her real life journey from rags to riches is the inspiration behind the film. “We lived in an 8×10 room with no electricity,” says Haslam. “We had a hand-to-mouth existence and I had given up all hopes of ever coming out of that. Some people abused us while others were kind enough to help us. This is what gave me the hope.”

The Briton who calls herself a ‘Kolkata girl’ visits her birthplace regularly to inspire youngsters and help elderly people. “Kolkata is still home and I am still an Indian,” adds Haslam. “Genes and blood lines aside, I’m still 100 percent Indian.”

Recently, the author acquired a land close to Kolkata to create a training centre and promises to return back to the city in November. Life hasn’t changed for the kids there today according to Haslam: “They still live in filthy conditions, going days on end without electricity and water. When I speak to these kids, they think that the slum is life; that there’s nothing else to live for. I point to myself and say I lived here for years but I made life better for myself.”

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