



In a moving memoir, Jillian Haslam recounts growing up with her 'Indian English' family in Kolkata during the 70s, facing racism, starvation, abject poverty, death and surviving. Now a motivational coach involved with charity work, she spoke to *Shana Maria Verghis*

There are several ways of describing Anglo Indians. One version uses the term for those British people who stayed back in India after the Raj. Another, to Europeans who married, or partnered Indians. It has also been used to describe people with Christian names.

In her book, *Indian. English, A Memoir* (by Mehta Publishing House), Jillian Haslam describes the community she was raised in, as being the first kind. Though technically, she is Eurasian.

Her father was born in India to British parents in Calcutta during 1922. Her mother to an Armenian and Scot. Armenians are considered Eurasian.

She identifies as British. But also as Indian. And her experiences of being Anglo Indian, were fraught with the tension that anyone considered 'different' feels. Primarily owing to racial differences. Like lighter skin and hair. Or a different upbringing.

Her parents married other people before they met each other. There were nearly a gap of 30 years between them and they had children from the first.

Born in 1970, Jillian was the second child of their marriage. By then her father was in his 50s, retired from the British Army. Despite having raised a family and been a senior officer, Roland Terrance Haslam wasn't comfortable zone moneywise.

He did low-key jobs, as Jillian and her sisters were born (several of whom died at birth). Jillian recalled, over a line from UK where she migrated to by 2000, "I never heard the word, 'bank' or 'savings' when I was growing up."

The young generation of Haslams in 70s Calcutta, seemed doomed to spend their lives on the lower rungs of society. With the trauma of burying children and constantly shifting residences, the family set base in Dum Dum, where Roland was appointed headmaster. But then had to flee by night when they got news that one of the girls, Donna, an attractive blonde with blue eyes, might be kidnapped by Naxalites, who were rumoured to have set their sights on her.

The Haslams subsequently went on to live in absolute squalor in Calcutta, when Roland went temporarily blind, on the train ride from Dum Dum. His wife and children sheltered with two women, who gave them a small place under a staircase, that was filthy and infested with vermin. (See photo).

Jillian's mother did odd jobs, often leaving the kids by themselves, with Roland at the Salvation Army clinic for eight months. The girls eventually were sent back to St Thomas' Girls school boarding, where they got free education, being Anglos. It saved them.

But there, Jillian recalled, "My sister Vanessa and my thoughts were about our parents starving. And when we were home, we had to take care of our two little siblings." She eventually left the slum in Kolkata where her family moved to later, surviving floods, near death of a fifth child, and with the girls frequently having to fend off sexual predators and racial slurs like 'white rat'.

Hard work took her to to the post of President of the Bank of America Charity and Diversity Network. She also took courses in motivational training and is often invited to run workshops. Her next plan, as her book is being scripted for a possible movie, is to return to India, and start an NGO. "My intention for writing the book was that irrespective of identity, you can change your life." She credits her parents with "doing the best they could for their children with available resources and a value system." Though by 10, she had to take

care of young siblings, and “learnt to starve,” being a child she also learnt to move on, and drew the best in most situations. The brood of children proved too much for an aging patriarch and his forbearing wife to handle.

In the end, the motivational classes would change Jillian Haslam’s life. “Education gave me a sense that I could alter my situation. Later, I studied how the brain works. Till around 25, your neurons create patterns of thought. Everything you do, say or visualise is recorded. Most of us operate on our past,” she shared. “So if something traumatic happens, you go towards things you never had. Only you can change thought patterns and be successful. It takes endurance. Then the world will want to know your story.”

Because she knew severe hunger (her sister and her would dig in drains for leftovers from schoolmates’ tiffins), she knows the value of giving food to a poor kid. “Do you know more than 12,000 people sleep every night and never wake up? Often from hunger. You can train the body to starve. But many don’t. If people got that one difference, it would help so much. No one gets poor by giving someone a biscuit.”