



Jillian Haslam and the indomitable spirit of resilience

It took unfathomable courage and persistence for Haslam to be where she is



By Sneha Bhura

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UK-based motivational speaker, author, trainer and philanthropist Jillian Haslam may now have a lovely house, cars and companies in her name. But carving out this life for herself required unfathomable courage and persistence in the face of crippling poverty. The 49-year-old was born to British parents who did not want to leave Calcutta after Independence in 1947, and paid a price for their attachment to the city with malnutrition, death and disease. Living under the staircase of a house in Calcutta, in a tiny space infested by rats and insects, where children relieved themselves and a merciless house owner bombarded her mother with lashings in lieu of domestic work, is just one of the many gut-wrenching anecdotes about her difficult childhood which is much written about.

Fifth of 12 siblings—many of whom could not survive their severely constrained circumstances and were put in tea-leaf boxes as coffins for burial—Jillian grew up in the slums of Kidderpore, until she moved out of Calcutta at 17 years of age when she got a job in Delhi and worked her way through the ranks of the banking world to become a millionaire. It is, of course, a story made for the big-screen. Haslam will now join forces with filmmaker Jack Sholder and screenwriter Joshua Russell to develop her book 'Indian. English' into a Hollywood film.

In an interview with THE WEEK, Haslam touchingly reveals how her one last dream is to go back to that little room in Kidderpore and live there for the rest of her life, and why in order to get what you want, you have to learn to give.

You've been a regular to Kolkata all these years. But when you revisited some of the sites from your early childhood for a pre-production recce for the upcoming film, how much of an emotional minefield it was to retrace those landscapes which surely must have completely changed?

I left India in the year 2000, since then, I have visited the country and Kolkata in particular at least three to four times a year and on each occasion, I have never failed to revisit all of these sites or places and this isn't because the locations are still very much the same to this day but for the people who are very close to my heart and will always be. The modi who gave us rice, dal, sugar, oil and so much more on a daily basis, the *panwalla* who gave us eggs, bread and sweets etc., the vegetable woman who gave us all the leftover almost every day, the tea shop owner who gave me milk that saved the life of my sister, the pharmacy who gave me medicine when she was burnt and who gave us so much more whenever any of us were ill, our neighbours who are from Orissa but who played with us in the lanes, gave us food, watched over us, fought with us and yet loved us so much. There is no way in which we could ever express our gratitude to these people who literally had nothing to give and yet they gave it all, for saving our lives and accepting us as their very own. The only way to really and truly show that you care, is to prove it and by that I mean that you never lose contact with them, you always make time to visit them and bring them little gifts, you remember their kids and most importantly for your own spirituality, genuine well-being and peace of mind; you remember where you came from at all times. This keeps you grounded and helps you to remember that gratitude and giving back is what truly gets you to where you want be in life.



What are some of the textual aspects from your book which might prove most challenging to translate on screen?

It is going to prove extremely difficult to shoot in Kidderpore or under the steps etc., given how small the surrounding area is. There is an entire production team that will need to be accommodated and many, many more crew members... but we have decided that as far as possible, most of the shooting will take place in Kolkata. This has been my one request to decision makers and they all seem to be in absolute agreement. In terms of scenes, the bathroom in which I was locked in as a child (with hundreds of cockroaches), has since been rebuilt, but they have looked at many similar toilets in the area and will build something close to what they have seen. The place under the steps seemed much smaller than the image that is on the cover of my book... Every chapter and every story is extremely cinematic and that it is going to be every star's dream to play any role given to them.

Who is expected to play your character in the film? What will dictate the choice of the actor?

There has been a tremendous amount of speculation but as far as I know there was talk about Angelina Jolie playing the role, since she was highly charitable and could understand the character immediately. Kate Winslet because she is just superb when it comes to playing such roles, and being British may fit right into the part of Jillian as an adult. Julia Styles because she looks a bit like me and a few others but I think what the director and producer have decided to do is to first get the script to be the very best, to then get the help of professionals to come up with a perfect title and then to get a casting agency

How have you reconfigured your relationship with Kolkata today? What are some of things about Calcutta you miss from the time you lived there?

Reconfigured is a very strong and yet completely incorrect term when it comes to my personal relationship with the city. I may have left in person but my heart has always remained in the city of my birth. I am a Kolkata girl and I never fail to mention this in all of my interviews or speeches. I wake up every morning at 4 am and take classes on zoom, training girls from here in the UK, I work with all of my teams on a daily and in fact, on an hourly basis on various programmes, events, issues and progress. We have four food banks for the aged, study centers for kids, tailoring, beautician and secretarial schools for young girls. We also have a special Mother Teresa project running after I received the Mother Teresa International Memorial Award. Hence, I live here but my spirit is very much there. I have spoken at most schools there and universities and I do all I can to give back to the city I love with all my heart. My one last dream in life is to go back to the little room in Kidderpore and live there for the rest of my life. I do need all the houses we have or the cars or material goods that we have acquired over the years. I am only making the movie with one intention and that is to help people who are in desperate need. I work every moment trying to reach out to as many people as I can only because I understand the destruction and the harm that poverty can do to individuals and to families alike. Nothing matters in the end and no Hollywood movie will mean anything if we are unable to alleviate some of the sadness and desperation that exists.

What are your views on the political changes sweeping Kolkata today, with right-wing populism roiling West Bengal? Has it affected your work there in any way?

All my work, both educational and charity, are targeted at the underprivileged in society who will continue to need support irrespective of the political inclinations of whichever party is in power. My organisation is firmly non-political and all we seek is the freedom to carry on with our work helping the people wherever we operate.

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