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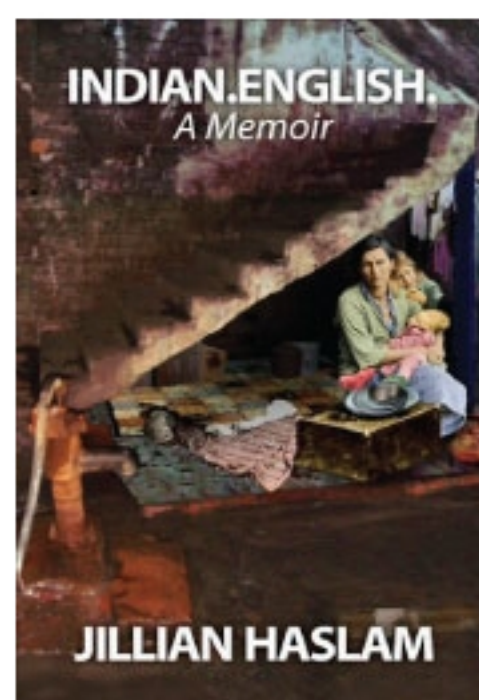
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Rags to riches millionaire helps poor Indian kids

A film script, based on Haslam's life, chronicled in her memoir, Indian.English, saw seven bidders at Cannes.

SUSENJIT GUHA Kolkata | 26th Jul 2014

Jillian Haslam, a 43-year-old UK-based Anglo Indian millionaire, philanthropist, trainer, motivational speaker and author plans to implement in India UNESCO's Delors Report, published in 1996, to educate children of impoverished families. Known as "Revisiting Learning: The Treasure Within", the Delors Report proposes an integrated vision for education worldwide in the light of 21st century's societal transformations. Haslam wants to implement Delors' E3 concept of education, empowerment and employment.



The cover of Haslam's book Indian.English, a Memoir (L); Jillian Haslam



Haslam was in Kolkata this week to address the city-based chambers of commerce. It's a city where she was born and grew up in amid crippling poverty. A city, which will be the backdrop of a film that is likely to be made on her life in the West.

Haslam is at present a motivational speaker at her HelpYourself Associates and has expanded operations of the Delhi based Remedia Trust Foundation, an education specific NGO set up by her in-laws. In an exclusive chat with The Sunday Guardian at her city hotel, Haslam, who plans to start her own school, asked, "Why should poor kids be deprived of English education when their parents are asked for huge amounts of money for admission?"

According to Haslam, the E3 concept will take care of poor children right from their admission to arranging for their employment, especially in back office jobs.

Remedia's operations have expanded to cater to old age people, the sick, the disabled, the impoverished and the neglected. Two such vocational study centres are running in Kolkata and a few more are in the pipeline.

A film script, based on Haslam's life, chronicled in her memoir, Indian.English, won seven bidders at Cannes. According to Hollywood filmmaker Manuel Freedman, "Indian.English, Haslam's unforgettable memoir, makes Slumdog Millionaire look like the fantasy it is."

When asked who would play her role in the film, Haslam said that it could be either Reese Witherspoon or Julia Stiles. "Julia Stiles looks a lot like me though," she added coyly. The film will feature the grocer at her Kolkata slum in Khidirpur who used to provide the Haslam family with rice, pulses and oil on credit and would refuse to take payment. It was small gestures like these that saved the lives of her ailing father, mother and Haslam's five siblings.

"The teashop owner in our neighbourhood saved my sister Susan who was dying of malnutrition, by providing free diluted milk every day. The grocer gave us credit and never asked for payment."

The neighbourhood meat seller would keep the bones with slivers of meat for the Haslams to rustle up a protein rich stew for the children. The local chemist would provide free medicines for her ailing father and the neighbourhood doctor would not take fees.

But it was also in this stinking slum in Kolkata's Khidirpur that she and her sister Vanessa faced abuse and discrimination because of their complexion and blonde hair.

"It was bad during Holi when the neighbourhood boys used to aim balloons at our breasts and it terrifying during Diwali when they would burst loud crackers close to our feet. Live crackers were sometimes thrown inside the window of our one-room residence, which overflowed with drain water when rains continued for days."

She says her family was hounded right from the time she was a toddler. When a wealthy family friend, Nazareth, set up a small school for poor children in the city's northern suburbs of Dum Dum and entrusted her parents with the responsibility of running it in the early 1970s, the Naxalites started targeting the only "white family" there. Finally, farmers and day labourers plotted their escape one morning.

When Haslam was 5-6 years old, her mother left the two daughters in the care of two old Anglo Indian ladies when her husband was recovering from a heart attack at the Salvation Army Hostel. The ladies provided them with shelter under a staircase, situated next to a public tube well, and made them work in exchange for some leftover food and basic tuition. "They beat our mother in front of us, but she still told us to be grateful because the ladies provided us with food," said Haslam.

With a plastic sheet as bed, the two small blonde girls were frequently preyed upon. "When we were very hungry, my sister and I never realised that we were being fondled by elderly people in exchange for a sweet or a toffee," Haslam lamented.

Unable to feed the growing children, Haslam's parents sent them to a charitable Christian boarding school in the city. At 17, Haslam left for Delhi and moved from one secretarial job to another. While working at a construction company in Delhi after leaving school, she would be deliberately made to work long hours by her bosses, two brothers, so that they could drop her home. "I had to hop from one job to another, until by a stroke of luck, I got the bank offer," Haslam said.

She was selected as the executive assistant of the CEO of the American Express Bank. In a couple of years, she switched to the Bank of America, worked in the same position, but was entrusted with the additional responsibility of presiding over the bank's charity and diversity networks. It was here that Haslam found her true calling and her future husband — a colleague.

Working 24/7, Haslam travelled the globe, pioneering projects for helping the poor, the disabled and the disadvantaged. She won accolades for her dedication and contribution to the company and put the bank on top in philanthropic activities because of the projects undertaken in India.

Haslam was already the PRO and in-charge of the country manager's office in India, when she decided to migrate to London and continue her career in banking. Getting into UK was easy since Haslam's father, Ronald, was born in India to British parents. Her mother, Margaret, was Anglo-Indian. After a stint with Morgan Stanley and the Royal Bank of Scotland, Haslam branched out on her own.

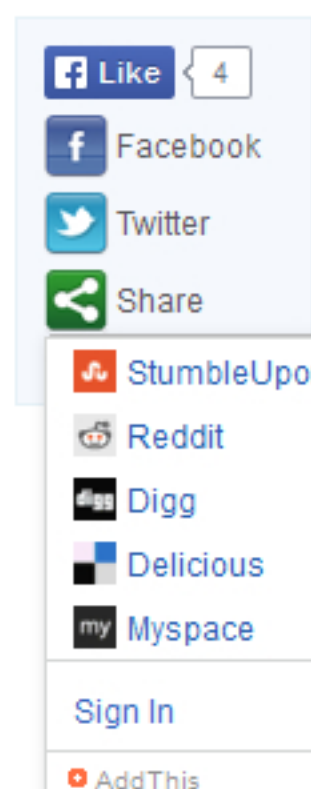
In spite of all the hardships, Haslam insists that her "role models in life were my Mom and Dad".

Whenever Haslam asked why they (the children) could not get proper clothes after her mother stitched scraps collected from tailors, her father would play Dolly Parton's Coat of many colours on a ramshackle record player. Poverty did not stop Haslam's mother from "feeding or providing shelter to a destitute for a day or two in our small room in spite of my pleas that there were girls inside".

When Haslam and her sister were again put up with an old lady, the girls were locked up in a cockroach infested stinking toilet for hours on end as punishment for dropping a plate or not cleaning up the tables to perfection.

Later, when Haslam and her sister were in boarding school, they visited an old age home where they found the lady in deplorable mental condition. They fed her some sweets even though she was in no position to recognise the girls she took pleasure in punishing.

According to Haslam, "The hardships and humiliations have left no rancour inside, but triggered awareness that miseries demand giving back by way of social work."



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