



Ramesh's achievement is filling a gap in the knowledge of Indira Gandhi with a well-merited account of her dedication to nature... A review P3

SUNDAY, 24 SEPTEMBER 2017

# 'Poverty is an epidemic'

In this conversation, Jillian Haslam talks about growing up poor in Kolkata, the kindness she received and giving back to society's needy

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Jillian Haslam's life story reads like a modern day fairy tale but there is no fantasy around it except the raw reality of poverty. One had the rare opportunity of having a conversation with Haslam when she came to Kolkata recently to receive the XX Mother Teresa Memorial International Award for social and humanitarianism.

Haslam, born an Anglo-Indian now settled in the UK, was the guest of honour at the awards function. The award ceremony was preceded by a peace rally that commenced from St Teresa's of Avila Church and concluded at Mother House with an open prayer by the representatives of all the major faiths. Excerpts from an interview:

**Q Looking back on your rags to riches story, how do you define the term 'poverty' within the Indian situation?**

"Poverty is like a punishment for a crime you didn't commit" said Eli Khamarov and I fully agree with this quote. Many people have had to endure this punishment for no fault of theirs. My parents lost four children to malnutrition and poverty. They did not have a home for several years and were reduced to living in a slum. They loved us the same way parents love their children. But extreme poverty did not allow them full expression. Poor people are good, honest, hardworking and kind but their punishment, only because they are poor, is relentless and unforgiving. That is what I see even today in India.

**Q Do you feel that poverty-stricken people here are used to their poverty?**

Yes. People have become so used to living with poverty in India that they do not care any longer. For someone like me who has lived through it, I can well understand the trauma, depression, distress and disillusion it can bring to those who live through it on the streets. Poverty is an epidemic but it all boils down to pure, unadulterated greed. We are now known as one of the richest countries in the world. Yet, our aged are dying on the streets, our disabled are dragging themselves around on cardboard or wooden boards and our young are giving up. The world talks of us being a super power but plagued by poverty.

**Q You have repeatedly said that when you were working in the Bank of America you were the victim of reverse racism — people made snide remarks and insulted you**



Haslam with children at the rally in Kolkata



With the Award

**because of your white skin. How has this changed your perception of being born Indian but not being accepted as one?**

We were too poor. We lived in a place where the neighbourhood did not understand why my mother wore skirts, why we were so fair and blonde, why our names were so different and why we lived among them. When there is so much confusion, it is easier to bully and criticise what you do not understand than accepting these people. When choco-

late bombs were thrown in front of our little shanty and water balloons were targeted at our chests, it was easy to believe that we were hated for being "different". Every word was about us being "white" so it was easy to feel "different", abused and humiliated.

But it is equally important to understand that not everyone thinks the same way. It also boils down to the compassion and understanding we are taught at home. Interestingly, the poorest of the poor such as the local grocer, *panwal-*

*lah*, meat seller, teashop owner and even the local pharmacist came to our rescue. They fed us, loved us, cared for us and rescued us as if we were their very own. They were ordinary poor Indians. Our parents explained to us that we should not become bitter but be compassionate towards these people whose life is nothing more than a struggle for existence. This helped us see things from a positive perspective.

**Q For every abuse you have encountered, there has been a counter act of kindness and generosity. In what way has this changed your ideology towards life?**

Yes, for every atrocity, there has been a parallel kindness and that is the way I look at it. My parents lost four children and I could have easily been one of them. But I am here and am grateful to so many who helped us and saved our lives. They did not care what colour our skin was, or, what clothes we wore, what language we spoke in or what blood ran in our veins. They loved us because we were children, alone, hungry and scared. I would not have reached where I have today if it was not for these people who taught me what it is to give and share even when you have nothing. I am happy to have been born in India among these people and been given the opportunity of having learnt so much.

**Q "Helping ordinary people to do extraordinary things" is the bottom line in your visiting card. You have begun a single-minded mission to help the needy, aged and handicapped. How did this all begin?**

I have always dreamt of reaching out to the desperate poor and the needy because I identify with them. I want to give back the way people helped me and my family during those years of desperate poverty. At the same time, I was aware that I needed the experience, skill and finances to realise my dream. I decided to go away, become strong, learn and develop myself so that I could go back and help my people. That is exactly what I did. I do not see it as helping the downtrodden. I see it as fulfilling my own dreams and returning the love and kindness that was bestowed on me and were the key ingredients that helped me become what and who I am today.

**You have already authored two books — Indian English and The Irrepressible Mind. Do tell a bit about them.**

*Indian English* can be interpreted in many ways. For me, it is a story about people like me who feel Indian but who are English. The two full-stops are two phrases put together to form the title. The message is — I feel Indian but I am English by ancestry.

After I wrote that book, I was often asked, "What does it take not to give up?" I felt I needed to

explain in detail what true resilience is all about, what it takes when people find themselves at rock bottom and what it takes to bounce back and to excel. *The Irrepressible Mind* is based on seven simple attributes that deal with commitment and a will that refuses to relent to any form of adversity.

**Q You have founded the Remedia Trust that has made a tremendous contribution to the marginalised segments of Kolkata and even beyond Indian shores. How do you remain so grounded and modest?**

Through this trust, along with like-minded friends, I have organised many welfare initiatives for the desperately poor and needy. We work with children and we already have five study centres for children in Kolkata, three food banks for the aged, and other helping centres to

help disabled children who may be blind, suffering from thalassemia, autism and cerebral palsy. It depends on how you see things.

You must imbibe the ability to switch every negative to a positive and stand up every time you fall down. I look at my past as the key to my success. I would never have been able to accomplish what I have if I had had it easy. I would never have been able to think the way I do if I had not been taught the art of attitude and gratitude. I would never have been able to see humiliation as humility and hatred as sadness and love. I had incredible parents who helped me see things differently. I grew up among people who had no reason to be proud and arrogant and therefore, that was all I learnt.

**Q Your current visit to Kolkata is to receive the prestigious XX Mother Teresa Memorial International Award for social and humanitarianism. What is your reaction?**

There was a time when I queued up to get a packet of biscuits, a bag of clothes and sometimes, a bag of powdered milk from the Sisters of Charity every Friday. I got a pat from Mother herself in Mominpur. I grew up seeing how she helped so many and I wanted to learn from her. Today, to be chosen and given this prestigious award in her name is overwhelming. Words cannot describe how blessed I feel and how determined I am to walk in her footsteps. It is an honour to be born in this great city, the city she called her home and my parents called their home. I want to use this as a stepping stone to continue and carry out her word.

