

# A *Desi* Girl At Heart

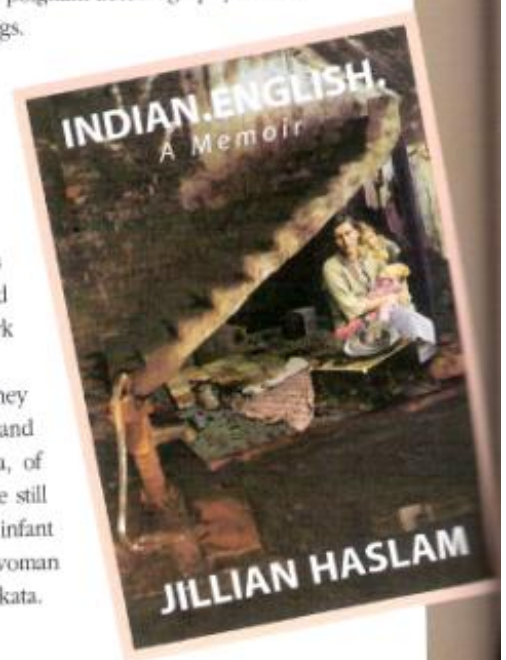
*Author of the memoir Indian. English., Jillian Haslam speaks to Society about her journey from the real lows to the real highs*

BY KAKOLI PODDAR

Coming from the slums to being a top level banker, witnessing the depths of despair to being a motivator to others, it has been an amazing journey for Jillian Haslam. Jillian's poignant autobiography is now an international bestseller and is sure to tug at anybody's heartstrings.

"Circumstances can change your life, but one should not be reduced by them," says Jillian Haslam, now a top Life Improvement Coach in the UK, a certified trainer of Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) and a reputed motivational speaker. After a successful two decade stint as a banker, Jillian is now a full-time life skills coach and social worker. She has dedicated her life to helping people overcome challenges in life the way she has. Based in London since the past 12 years, Jillian is the Founding Director of Help Yourself Associates, a life improvement and training company. In London, Jillian visits schools, trainings, women's work groups and alcoholic centres in a bid to make a difference.

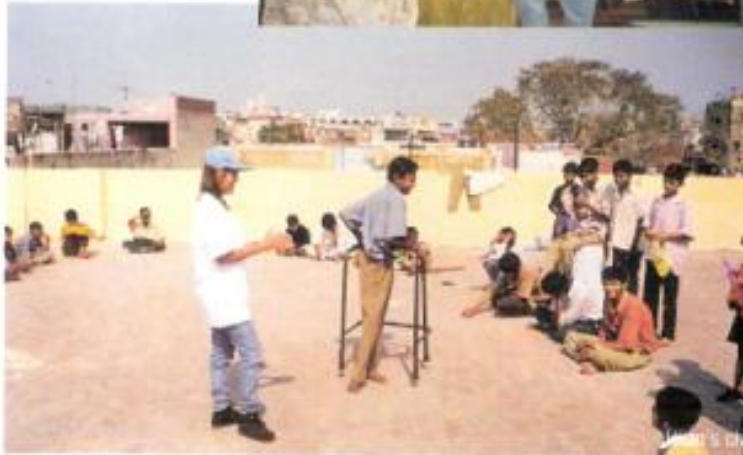
Her memoir, *Indian.English.*, is a heart-wrenching account of her journey in life as an Indian-English girl born in post-colonial India, of the misery and struggle during her childhood in the squalid, dingy bylanes of Calcutta, of fighting abject poverty and abuse, of taking on adult responsibilities while still a child and of grappling with illness and death, including the loss of four infant siblings due to malnutrition and poverty. We caught up with this ordinary woman with extraordinary courage, who is also embarking on charity work in Kolkata.







The passage where she lived



Jillian's charity work



Jillian was born in India to British parents. "My father was a Captain in the British Army. He chose to stay back in India after independence and was working in a private company. My mother was a school teacher, who single handedly struggled to make ends meet when my father was extremely ill after having a heart attack. I remember my sisters and I were travelling with dad in a very crowded train, when he suddenly had a heart attack. It was harrowing as we panicked, trying to save him, and some men in the train, instead of helping, tried to molest my sister in the crowd."

Despite the painful memories of childhood, grappling poverty and despondency, Jillian does not look back with bitterness or anger because as she says, "For every atrocity and defilement we had encountered, we also found a parallel act of kindness or sacrifice, often from the poorest of the poor, who helped our family to survive. Within these humble people thrives a grace beyond description that literally saves lives every hour of every day."

Brutally honest about the past, Jillian shows us the poignant photograph of her first 'home'—a space under a flight of stairs, overlooking a tube well. "At times, things got so difficult that we felt we were losing the will to live and life

could not get any worse. We had no choice but to endure with the hope that tomorrow would be a better day," she says.

As for being victims of racial abuse, Jillian says, "I think the perpetrators did that more out of ignorance than spite. We looked 'different'. Yes, they called us names—not-so-nice ones, like, 'white lizards, white cockroaches' and so on."

Jillian still recalls with sadness the loss of her twin siblings when she was just five. "I remember how happy I was having a twin baby brother and sister. I remember the grief I felt personally and the pall of gloom and despair that descended over the house for months after they were 'sent to Jesus'. Dad could not afford to buy coffins for them and my infant brother and sister had to be put into tea boxes and buried somewhere. Till her death, my mother lamented that she did not know where her babies lay buried," says Jillian with grief.

The story of despondency is not over. "When I was eight years old, I almost lost my youngest sister to malnutrition and poverty. The doctors had given up her case as a lost cause, but I frantically prayed and strived to ensure that we did not have to send her 'back to Jesus'. I asked for milk for her from a little tea shop in our locality and their kind gesture helped save my sister," she recalls emotionally.

Jillian says that despite odds, she, along with her siblings, was brought up with strict upright values of honesty and courtesy. She remembers poignantly, "My mother always said that children should be seen and not heard. Even if there were seven of us in a tiny room, we were as quiet as mice. We were taught to say our 'please' and 'thank you', and to refuse second helpings, even when our mouths were watering for that delicious second biscuit on the rare occasions when we were at someone's house."

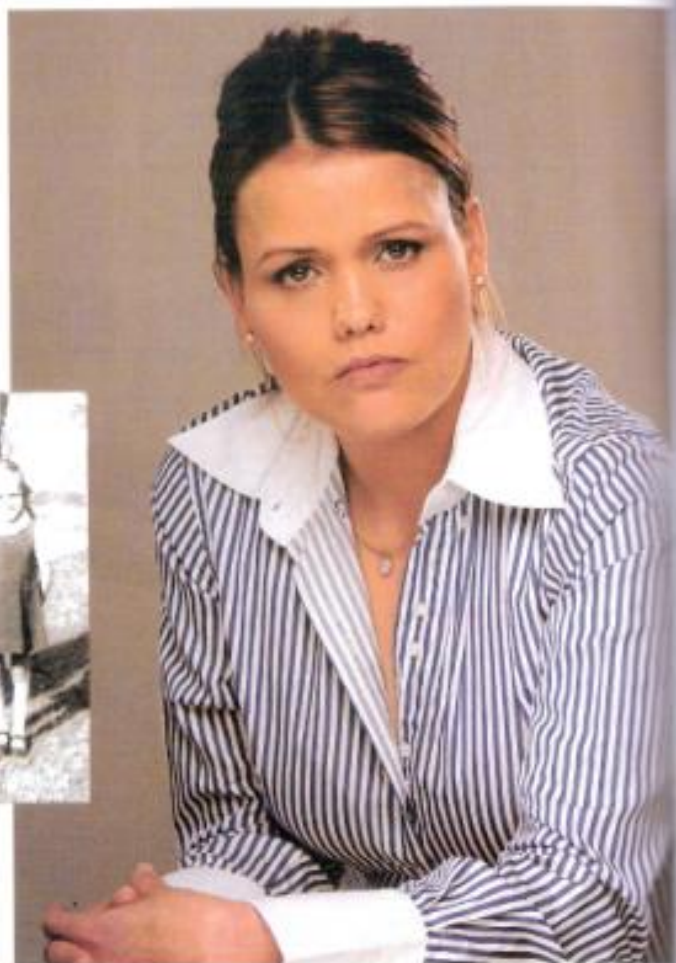
Quite obviously, Jillian's dreams as a young girl were very different from that of other kids her age. "Dreams of a bedroom done in pink or a doll or fancy clothes never existed in my imagination. My dreams were simple, ensuring that we all had good meals, not to see my parents worrying about the rent or outstanding bills, to see my family just alive, without something serious happening to any of them. As I have grown older, my dreams have changed in a different direction—to put a smile on the faces of the people trapped in unfortunate situations that I faced as a child. I hope to go some way towards the achievement of this goal."



Jillian says that despite hardships, her mother was determined to give the children a proper education and that is what sustained them in the long run. While in Kolkata, Jillian went on to work in the Bank of America as the President of their Charity and Diversity wing. This is where she worked with the orphanages, old-age homes, deaf and dumb institutes and hospitals.

"When I worked in the Bank of America, I visited slums where the children would give anything just for a sweet or a biscuit," she says and continues unabated, "They reminded me of my childhood. Someone who has always been able to have different kinds of treats can never understand what one sweet or a biscuit can mean when you're starving. I have cried with the deaf and dumb teenagers who were being abused everyday by men of power and status. I have held little children, who have been starving for days, raped by their own relatives, and who don't have a hope in the world. I have been with the aged people on the footpath who are in need of shelter and clothes, who do not have the strength to even talk. I have participated in and watched scenes that would shock the world, if only they cared enough to want to know."

Jillian admits that her job in the Bank of America was most fulfilling. It was an extremely sad moment for her when she left



the Bank of America. "It was when I lost the charity budget. Since then I've been helping people from my training and coaching programmes that I run in the UK and from the sales of my book. I studied further, and set up my training company, an institute with the Association of Integrative Psychology (USA). I plan to bring my trainings to India in order to help educate and train those who can afford to pay and in turn help the needy."

Though she migrated to the UK in search of a better life and career, Jillian has not snapped ties with the city which has been both 'cruel and kind' to her. Now, having been able to put her traumatic past behind her, Jillian keeps coming back to Kolkata. She says emotionally, "I may be in the UK in flesh, but my heart and soul is always in India, the country of my birth."

We quiz the *Indian English* girl whether she considers herself English or Indian. She says emphatically, "Though I have no control over my ancestry or genes, I am hundred per cent Indian." <<